Interview with Ambassador David M. Ransom

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR DAVID MICHAEL RANSOM

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: Ambassador Ransom was unable to edit his interview before his death.]

Q: What were some of the places you lived in?

RANSOM: After the war, we lived in Alexandria, Louisiana, where an air base was being opened and in Greenville, Texas, where an air base was being opened, and in San Antonio, where there was an air base was being opened and in New York City. After the war, my father decided to remain in the Air Force. It became an independent service at that time. We then lived in Washington, DC and in Athens, Greece.

Q: Were you being raised mainly with other military kids?

RANSOM: Of course; we moved from place to place and I attended civilian schools, so that I was both in a military community and a civilian one as well. Immediately after the war, I was a member of one of the first families that went to live in Japan. My father had been sent there immediately after the war to be part of the occupation army. When facilities for dependents were developed and it was deemed secure, families were sent to join the bread winners.

Q: You were in Japan when?

RANSOM: That would have been early 1947-1949. I can remember driving across the country from Texas, where we had a small house. My father had previously been assigned to open a base. We drove to Seattle, Washington, crossing states where roads were poorly paved and were very narrow, passing through all kinds of scenery. Then we got on a ship and went to Japana country in ruins—, and moved into a house off in the hillsides.

Q: Where were you?

RANSOM: In Fukuoka, down in Kyushu, the southernmost island. We had a purely military existence there. We went to military schools and eventually moved onto a military base. It was called Ikazikay. I made Japanese friends in Fukuoka with whom I still correspond and even visit. They have gone through the whole 50 years of post-World War II Japanese development while I have watched a similar evolution in the United States. They are very good friends.

Q: You must have assimilated more than most. During the Korean War, I was on an Air Force base. I was an enlisted man. We had a significant number of the adults who never went off the base.

RANSOM: We did go off the base, but it is fair to say that I didn't assimilate an awful lot of the local culture. I saw it almost entirely through the eyes of my father and his colleagues. They were occupiers. They were not contemptuous, but many of the fathers of the boys and girls that went to school with me had flown the raids that had devastated Japan. They thought they were both entirely justified in doing that and lucky to have survived. We looked at our role as benign, but as warranted opposition. The results were plain to see.

One of the things that I carry away from my childhood and subsequent periods is the view that World War II was indeed a good war in the sense that our main antagonist then was a threat to the world and is now a democracy, an ally and friend and very

prosperous. So, I came away from this early experience with a nationalist view of America that was essentially one of a country that was not just victorious but was engaged in great transformation of its previous foes.

Q: Was there much talk about whither Japan around the dinner table at home?

RANSOM: That was something that came naturally to me when I eventually ended up in the Foreign Service, but, to be honest, it was not a staple in our military household. My father was engaged in different types of activities. We tended, particularly through my mother, to have a broader range of interests— in Japanese art, Japanese friends, and Japanese life. We had friends who were not strictly speaking engaged in military activity in Japan. My father was a logistics officer— materiel, and supply. We had friends in the military government. There was no business community to speak of. There were some channels into Japanese society, but I must tell you that most of what I learned about Japan I learned later when I was in college and studied it.

Q: I think this is true for so many of us. Let's start first with grammar and elementary school and then move to high school. What courses, types of reading, particularly interested you?

RANSOM: There was no television and there was very little radio that I could listen to; so I spent a lot of my time with books and magazines in my youth, particularly when I lived off the base in Japan and elsewhere. I subscribed to a lot of boys' magazines and I read a lot of westerns and dog stories, romances, adventure stories and such. I had stacks of them and I tended to read them not just once but twice. I found good books to be good friends and that experience of my childhood has stayed with me all my life.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

RANSOM: After Japan, my father was assigned to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington. After that tour, we went to Greece. My father was part of the U.S. military

mission there. That was really in many ways my coming of age. I learned a lot of lessons and it was part of my intellectual dawning.

However, at the very end of that tour of duty, my father very unexpectedly died of a heart attack. He was 39. We had no home place. We had had an itinerant existence up to then. We ended up going back to the only place where we had a house — in Greenville, Texas. We had no family there, no real close friends, just this house. My mother didn't know what to do on five days' notice. The household goods had to be shipped, tickets had to be bought. We were suddenly left in a vacuum.

Q: How old were you then?

RANSOM: I was 14. Then, by a circuitous set of circumstances which involved friends we had made in the Athens embassy, I was recommended for a scholarship at the Choate School in Wallingford, Connecticut. I was tested through essays and eventually accepted. So, at the age of 16— in many ways a very young man—I got on the MKT Blue Bonnet Express in Greenville, Texas, and two and a half days later, I got off the train in Wallingford, Connecticut, and made my way up the hill to this school.

Q: When you were in Athens, you were in early high school.

RANSOM: Yes, the year before high school, and the first year, a freshmen, of high school.

Q: This was about when?

RANSOM: It was 1951-1953. It was a wonderful period of time. There we had a lot of friends in the American school whose parents were in the embassy or in the AID mission, in an archaeological society, in some business, and a lot of Greek-American friends. I began to be exposed to history, art, religion, different cultures, politics, and economics in ways that I had never considered before. We belonged to a very lively and talented

community of people and it taught me a great deal. It was a wonderful education at what was called the American Community School.

Q: All three of my kids went there at one time. This was in the early 1970s.

RANSOM: In the old home of King Zahd of Yugoslavia.

Q: Yes. You went to Choate. This was Kennedy's old school.

RANSOM: Yes. He was there briefly. He never graduated.

Q: Could you tell me a little about Choate? This would be when?

RANSOM: I started there in 1954 and graduated in 1956.

Q: Tell me a little bit about Choate. This was one of the major prep schools.

RANSOM: It was an extraordinarily good school with a highly disciplined, active curriculum and with a regimented life. I liked it very, very much. I benefited enormously from that education. It led to my going to Princeton on a full scholarship which then led to my career in the Foreign Service. At the beginning, I was very much a fish out of water. I was a boy with very little money in a school which had a lot of very rich boys—a boy from Texas in a place that drew almost all of its students from Connecticutkids with East Coast attitudes and ideas. I was a boy who was very naive about a lot of things, particularly about business. But again, I made a lot of friends, some of whom are still friends. We talk and see each other after all of these years. That's nice. My brother, seven years younger than I, eventually followed me to Choate.

One of our proudest accomplishments is that we have between the two of us established through donations over a period of many years, a scholarship in the name of the woman who gave the scholarship that we had. Every year now, as this fund grows, some student

like us now goes to Choate and hopefully will have some of the same kind of experiences that we had in Choate and in our lives after graduating from there.

Q: What subjects particularly interested you?

RANSOM: I didn't do smashingly well in mathematics, although I scored high in tests. I was chiefly interested in subjects like history and English. I did generally well across the board. I was an industrious young man and I worked very hard.

Q: You had been in Japan and in Greece. Did foreign affairs keep your attention during this time?

RANSOM: Yes, it did. In the mid-to-late 1950s, it wasn't hard to be very interested in government rather than in business, even though I was in the environment where most of my schoolmates came from business families. This was because in the postwar period the threats that emerged to the U.S. from the Soviet Union and from China seemed to be extraordinarily difficult to deal with. As a young man I believed that we had adequate military strength to meet these challenges, but I wondered whether as a people we would able to match the Soviets and other communists in development, social justice, and issues like that. I think these were naive thoughts from a young man who didn't know better. But at the time, that concern was very acute.

Q: It wasn't just for young high school students. This was something that was of concern to major segments of our society.

RANSOM: I think that's right. Later on, in Princeton, even though I sort of detoured into another type of major, I kept my focus on public service. I then went to graduate school, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and got a degree in Middle East international economics, institutions, and law. At that time, three or four percent of our GNP was foreign trade, our defense budgets were booming and diplomatic efforts were expanding enormously. Because of my concerns, it wasn't hard to me to enter government

rather than business. If I had to make the same choice today when something like 39% of our GNP is in trade— either coming in or going out, and including services as well as productswhile there is a diminished threat from abroad, I might think very differently. Now I am very, very happy being involved in international business. I don't miss the government too much.

Q: At Choate, do you recall any of the books or authors that particularly interested you?

RANSOM: I was coming out of a curriculum of a Texas high school which was very limited. Everything was taught at Choate with a great passion and a great thoroughness. Looking back on Choate, all subjects seemed fresh and inspiring. Poetry, English prose, historyparticularly of the United States. The school had an ethos of public service, trading on Jack Kennedy's stay at Choate as well as Adlai Stevenson and others, including a young man named Downey, who was killed when his Air Force plane when down while on a secret mission over China.

Q: Leon Downey.

RANSOM: That's right. There was a free day every year, declared by the headmaster of the school to honor Downey.

All of us were boarders. There were no girls at the school at that time. We were boys whose fathers had been marked by World War II. They had come out of the Depression and World War II radically reoriented in the world and in economic standing. They had either fought in the war or they had supported the war. So, national service and public service was something that we took to like mother's milk. The school provided it to us in great dollops. I think some of that has changed now, but Choate was at that time a Christian school. It was a school which saw itself in the mission of service. It was a school that emphasized commitment to high ideals. I was greatly affected by that.

Q: I had a similar experience a little earlier. I went to Kent for four years. We used to play you in football.

RANSOM: That's right.

Q: Why Princeton?

RANSOM: Princeton, Columbia, and Harvard all offered me scholarships. I am not sure that the reasons why I chose to go to Princeton were very good. They were as good as a young man like myself could make more or less on his own. I thought Princeton was a very good school to attend. I wasn't particularly attracted as a small boy from Texas to living in the big city of New York. In fact, I've always had a certain aversion to New York City. It's nothing rational, I suppose. Princeton was a place where you could have cars and live off campus. I thought it might be easier for somebody in my economic status to attend. I didn't have the benefits of a wealthy background. That worked well. It also turned out that my notion that Princeton was a place where people were well taught was true.

The education as such was extraordinarily good. I loved it. I loved every course I took. I had great roommates again. There was a variety of young men.

I eventually did something which made no rational sense but which I've never regretted. Rather than be confined to a large major, I took a bridge program offered by the Religion and History Department. I also convinced each of these two departments to allow me to take a lot of cognates in other fields. So, I participated in a wonderful sort of smorgasbord of courses— everything from the European novel to Gothic architecture to Chinese art and political science, along a good core of ethical and philosophical studies from the Religion Department, and medieval history courses. While this is not relevant to any kind of a professional goal, it has proven again and again to be key to a good, full, and happy life with lots of interests. I can only say that it was a marvelous experience.

Q: I am sure that as a Foreign Service officer, you found yourself drawing on those subjects again and again.

RANSOM: That's right. The Foreign Service is a wonderful place for men and women of lots of different interests. In general, particularly when you're in an embassy, you have lots of time to pursue these other interests. You have the most wonderful access to people in other countries who are deeply immersed in them. Our dinner tables overseas, particularly because Marjorie was a USIA officer (I want to tell you, incidentally, that as of Friday, she was just promoted to the rank of career minister.) was always a place where there was a tremendous amount of talk about economics, archeology, education, literature, women's issues, diplomacy, security, local society. It was a continuing education. In that sense, I see the Foreign Service as being a continuation of what I started out doing as a young man in Greece discovering the Parthenon, the mathematics used to design the great structure and its supporting columns, the aesthetic ideas, the notions of how it was used as a house of worship, its role in the social community, its economic status as an important source of pilgrimage fees, etc.

Q: At Princeton, did thoughts of the Foreign Service intrude at all?

RANSOM: Yes, they did. I started out by saying when I went to Princeton that I wanted to go into the Foreign Service. Then I took this long and wonderful detour through the magical woods of a liberal arts education, but came to the reluctant conclusion at the end that I had to do something to support myself. So I went back to the idea of the Foreign Service. It had always been the State Department that I wanted to join. There were alternatives available, of course. The CIA recruited at that time on the Princeton campus.

Q: The CIA was going very heavily into the Ivy League schools.

RANSOM: Yes, they were. They recruited out of the Office of the President.

Q: How about languages?

RANSOM: I took French at Princeton. I had learned a little Greek when I was a boy and very, very little Japanese. I wasn't a great linguist. I took Arabic during my last term at Princeton because I knew I was going to need it in graduate school. That has been a continuing labor all of my life.

Q: What steered you towards the Middle East?

RANSOM: It was again a series of decisions that only an ill-informed young man could possibly make.

Q: Is there anything other than an ill-informed young man?

RANSOM: I don't think so. I had to make honest efforts to come to grips with the fact that I had to support myself. I couldn't be a student all my life on scholarship money. I had a degree in religion and history. I had kept bumping up against Middle Eastern issues during various courses at Princeton. I thought the Middle East was a good way to segue into something that would support me. I thought the Middle East was an area where we were involved because of our national interests. It was a place that had an exotic allure. I really can't tell you why I chose the Middle East rather than the Far East. After all, I had a connection with Japan. In fact, more of my studies were focused on Europe. I could have gone into European affairs. But I didn't. I just didn't. I guess I had never had any cause to regret it, but now, looking back on those decisions after 40 years, I am a little hard put to describe them in rational terms.

Q: I think this is so true. While you were still at Princeton and thinking about the Middle East, what was the role of Israel? When you thought of the Middle East, did you think of the Arab world or did you think of the Arab world and Israel?

RANSOM: I didn't think of Israel at all. The Middle East issues at that time were managed in the government by a group of men who had come out of missionary activities, oil activities, and military activities. Almost none of them were Jewish. They had no contacts or associations with Israel. The foci for me in the Middle East were the exotic culturesthe Muslim cultures. It was oil. It was the Soviets. It was radical nationalism. It was development—the idea of helping new nations emerging on the world stage. All of these were fascinating subjects to me. Israel had absolutely nothing to do with it. In that, I think that the last 40-50 years has brought a great difference. It is a great difference. People now coming into the Foreign Service and working on the Middle East almost invariably have a different attitude toward the Arabs than existed in the 1960s. Today, they are very concerned about Israel and have connections with Israel. They have lived in Israel. They studied the Middle East because of Israel. Oil, Russians, exotic cultures are secondary.

Q: At Princeton, wasn't there a famous scholar there who wrote a definitive book on the Arabs?

RANSOM: Yes. Phillip Hitti. But I didn't take his course. I was doing other things. I started in graduate school with what I considered to be a set of professional studies. I think I made the right choices.

Q: You graduated from Princeton in 1960?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: Then you went to the School of Advanced International Studies (John Hopkins) from 1960-1962. First, did you get caught up in the election of 1960? This was one that caught an awful lot of your cohorts.

RANSOM: It was the first time I voted in my life. It was a national election. I was extraordinarily excited by the election. I remember that I was determined to go to the inauguration.

Q: It was a beautiful day.

RANSOM: A beautiful, icy day. I lived off in Southeast Washington in my mother's house. There was no driving back then. I walked most of the way. I got to the Capitol grounds just before the inaugural speech. There was a considerable throng of people. Of course, I lacked tickets, but I climbed a tree. I have never forgotten that because it was so icy that my hand virtually stuck to the tree. I was absolutely entranced by the speech that Jack Kennedy gave that day. In many ways, the phrases and ideas became the guide posts in my life and in my memory. A great moment!

Q: It really formed a whole generation, I think, for our profession.

RANSOM: As I said, it gave some focus to my subsequent career, but my own inspiration for the Foreign Service goes back a lot further than that. Looking back on it, I do so with a jaundiced eye. I don't see Jack Kennedy as a break from the past, but rather a continuation of a lot of things that Eisenhower had done. The American public has behaved very responsibly and even brilliantly in making the world a better place. I am extremely proud of that now as well as the time that I spent on that endeavor, having had something to do with all of that in my little, small way.

Q: At SAIS, what did a Middle Eastern major consist of for you?

RANSOM: It consisted of language, which was very demanding. It consisted of Middle Eastern studies, which were another block of courses. Then the third set of courses that were taught to everybody who went to SAIS consisted of international economics, international institutions, international law, and international politics. SAIS was at that time (nowadays, the curriculum is commonplace.) pioneering a curriculum which brought

together the efforts of many men in many different departments to focus on men and some women who would go off and work in international business or in the government in international affairs. It was put together by a group of men who had been matured in the war and saw a need for this kind of school. It wasn't being done anyplace else. They set it up here in Washington. The vision and the energy that they brought had been inspired by the great efforts of World War II.

Q: How did you find Arabic?

RANSOM: Arabic is a tough language. I don't think I've ever mastered it. I recently had to give a presentation about a telecommunication startup company in Arabic in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. I thought I did it brilliantly. Actually, the investor in question after this 45 minute explanation of infrared optical beams and things like this was impressed, even though I had used instead of the Arabic plural for the word “satellites,” another form which actually meant “bets” or “wagers.” Fortunately, he understood what I was trying to say. He made the connection after looking puzzled a bit at first. So I still make errors. Arabs are very nice in not holding these types of errors against you. They think that anybody who tries to speak their language is a good friend.

Q: Was the Foreign Service your major goal or were you thinking of ARAMCO or something like else like that?

RANSOM: I interviewed with ARAMCO. Again, it was this choice between government and business. But there was no real competition in my mind. I thought the Foreign Service was the pinnacle. You have to remember that - and I'm sure you do because of your own experience in the military - at that time, there was a draft. In going to graduate school, I was putting off the service that was required of me. I had no particular desire to avoid it . So, after graduate school, my time on scholarly exemptions ran out. I went into the Marine Corps as a young officer—a lieutenant. I was in the infantry. I spent three years doing that, all before Vietnam.

Q: Where did you serve?

RANSOM: I served in Okinawa and in Norfolk, Virginia. I went to basic training school in Quantico. My service in the Marine Corps shaped the timing of all of my career decisionsas it did for all others who went through the military path.

Q: Not only that, but the Marine Corps seems to be: once a Marine, always a Marine. I notice you have a tie clasp with the Marine Corps emblem on it.

RANSOM: I have two tie clasps to my name: this one and another one just like it. That is true, but the reason again that I went into the Marines was one of those curious things. It goes back to being an ill-informed young man— an isolated, independent young man. During my first semester of college, I took an Air Force ROTC course. I found the whole thing very dull compared with the other courses that were being offered at Princeton. I figured out that this wasn't hard. If you took one ROTC course every term and there were eight terms, that's one year of school. If you went into the Marines, you did two summers and no courses at school.

Q: And you got paid for it, too.

RANSOM: I actually went through school with a scholarship that came partially from Princeton and another one that came from the War Orphans Act, for which I qualified, although my father was not a war victim. The Veterans Administration administered that scholarship.

That meant that my school years were mine to use as I saw fit. I did have to spend two summers with the Marines and I decided - again in a not-so-clever decision - that I would do all 12 weeks one summer in a back to back six week programs. That experience was a little like going to Hell and coming back barely alive. It marked me in many ways for life. It

was easily the most difficult experience and strenuous thing I had ever done. It made me into a new person, terribly proud of what I had gone though with many different memories.

So, it was a good experience. Thirteen members of my class of 60 became Marine officers. When I got to my battalion, it was half filled with young men just like myself; many of them were just out of the Ivy League and had joined the Marines because they thought if they had to be in the military, they wanted to be in the most extreme form of it.

Q: It was a little bit of a test of yourself, wasn't it?

RANSOM: It was all of that. It gave me a great education and I have always been terribly proud of it. I like the Marines.

Q: How did you find the Marine Corps when you ended up on Okinawa and elsewhere training the men? What was your impression of the enlisted men?

RANSOM: They were extremely rough. The Marine Corps at that time was easily the least educated of all the services. Over half of the men, including officers, did not possess college degrees. The Marines consciously chose to promote men from the enlisted ranks into the officer corps. This is because in World War II whole battalions were chewed up getting ashore which required constant promotion on the battlefield of sergeants to command positions. They continued to think that as the shock troops—definition of the Marine Corps— they would be well served by these practices. This meant that some of the junior officers were tough as hell, but not very sophisticated. The Marine Corps itself was the only organization that didn't take draftees. An good number of the Marines in my platoon, for instance, were there because they had gotten into trouble and the judge had said, “You can go to jail or you can go to the Marines.”

So, the only thing that made the Marine Corps work in that time were the NCOs who were just about as mean and tough a bunch as you would ever want to meet. That was

leavened by the idealism of the new junior officers,—the first and second lieutenants. So we had a funny combination of people.

The Marines got in a lot of trouble going on shore leave in a port; it was not unusual at all to leave a port in the Far East with a Marine in a body bag. There were lots of fights. There were lots of disturbances. It was from the iron discipline and unsparing traditional military justice. But it was one hell of a military outfit. Everybody was joined together.A lot of these young troopers were in the Marine Corps to get something out of it—not necessarily just to serve. What they got out of it was something they had never had before: pride, structure, honorable demands, and extreme demands. They were growing up, too. So, it was quite an experience for me. I found that there wasn't a whole lot to being a professional student all my life. I got into the Marine Corps when I was 23 or 24 years old. I had became accustomed to a student regimen of getting up at 6:00 am and going to bed at 12:00 and 1:00 at night and working every minute of the waking day as a student. Suddenly in the Marine Corps, you went to work at 8 and finished at 5 or 6 p.m.

Q: What you're saying makes sense. I have been told that of all the services (Air Force, Army, Navy, and Marines) , the people who dealt with higher rank officers have found that the Marine officers seem to be more intellectual than the other ones. The Army comes next.

RANSOM: I think that's true. The senior Marine officers were almost always very thoughtful and studious guys. They read a lot. I can't explain it exactly. You had so many guys coming up from the ranks—Mustang officers— who were not readers, were not academics, and were not thoughtful. They were just tough, mean, good, and devoted men. But they never made it past the rank of lieutenant colonel. They were the fighters. Then there was also a tradition in the Marine Corps that came from its southern roots of gentleman warriors. The Marines had some Naval Academy graduates, but they drew very heavily from other schools like VMI and southern ROTC programs. There was something

there that led them to think about history and think about society; they took an expansive view of their jobs and profession.

Q: I'm not sure if it's true today, but certainly up until recently, the people from the South often have a much greater sense of family and history than other sections.

RANSOM: Yes, I think that's right.

Q: Except maybe of New England, but a different type.

RANSOM: I think it was also true that young men from good families in the South didn't have the career choices that they might have had if they were from the Northeast, the Midwest, or someplace else. The military was the only honorable profession available to them and they took it up very happily. Clearly the officer who was most admired in the Marine Corps was Robert E. Lee, not Ulysses Grant, even though Ulysses Grant produced easily the best book of memoirs with the best English and the best history of the Civil War of any of those generals.

Because they were all there by choice (as I said, no draftees in the Marine Corps), they thought of themselves as a band of brothers. There was a great deal of shared indignity. They had not privileges on Navy ships. They didn't like the Navy. They had to fight with the Army and the Air Force. They didn't like the Army and the Air Force. They thought that the only way they were going to get by was to depend on each other; that made for a terrific sense of fraternity in the ranks. That was very appealing to me with my particular background - a fatherless boy and not exactly a natural fit at Choate and Princeton. The military also was paid very badly, but there was a great deal of “rah, rah” carousing stuff that went on. I found it a time of extraordinary friendship, discussions, and activities. Your battalion boards a ship and sails around the South China Sea for six weeks. There was nothing to do but read and talk. There is no place to go and nothing to do. The troops were down in the holes and you got about 25 minutes a day on one of the decks for exercise.

For the rest of the time, you're on your own. So, I read right through George Eliott, right through Dickens, and right through whatever there was available.

Q: Did the Korean War play much of a role with you?

RANSOM: I was a newspaper delivery boy in Suitland, Maryland, at the time North Korea invaded the South. I remember going down to the shipping dock. I delivered a little tabloid called “The Washington Daily News.” There was this headline. I didn't know what it meant. I was too young really ever to find out, so that war didn't have much of an impact. In fact, my maturation really came between the Korean War and the Vietnam War. I was not directly involved in either one, but saw them from the outside in different ways. So, in that sense, my view of this time in our history was colored by the accident of being outside it.

Q: When did you take the Foreign Service Exam?

RANSOM: I took the Foreign Service Exam when I was in graduate school in Washington, DC, at Roosevelt High School up in Northeast Washington. At that time, it was a two-day examination. I have never forgotten that I did particularly well on the general knowledge section of the test, but I did well on the other sections as well. I do remember the test including a question that asked “Name a line from the 'Star Spangled Banner.'" It then gave you four choices for the next phrase after “Bombs bursting in air...” I was working through the test and I heard someone on the other side of the room starting to hum “The Star Spangled Banner” to himself. He had gotten to this question before I had. I couldn't figure out what that was. Then someone else did it. Finally, I got to that question and I realized... I'm sure that everybody in the room at one point or another hummed the phrase because that is the only way you could remember which phrase came next. It was a funny moment.

I put that off reporting for duty for several years because I first had to finish graduate school and then I finished my service in the Marine Corps. I left the Marine Corps on December 1, 1965 and on December 7, I entered the Foreign Service.

Q: How about the oral exam? When did you take that? Do you remember the questions?

RANSOM: I do remember the questions. There was a man named Homer Byington on my panel. He was our ambassador to Malaysia.

Q: At one point, I was consul general in Naples. Three generations of the Byingtons had been in Naples.

RANSOM: Is that so? He was very much of an old-line sort of Foreign Service officer. At that time I took my orals, Princeton had supplied more members to the Foreign Service than any other school in the United States. I think Yale was next. Places like Michigan, Virginia, and Berkeley, which provide so many now, simply had been shut out. I remember Byington asking me what I would do if I were assigned to India and heard some people criticize the racial practices that they had heard we used in the States. I said, “I would remind them that they had much to do in their own country before they could raise with us the racial discrimination issue.” Homer thought that was a very good answer.

As was the practice at the time, I was called right back after the test and told that I had passed. Candidates would sit outside while the board would discuss their performances. There was a secretary in the room. I was nervous. She kept saying, “Don't worry. You'll hear soon enough. It will be alright” and things like this. She was a nice, motherly woman. Then the door opened and Homer came out and invited me in. We just chatted for a bit about the oral examination; he did not tell me what had happened. I said finally, “I hope you're going to tell me that I passed.” He said, “You did.”

Then he began to give me some advice. He was a heavy guy with a big, round face. He said, “Now, the one thing I should suggest to you is that you think very soon about getting

married before you go into the Foreign Service. Get a good American wife that would like this type of work." A bygone era!

Q: Oh, yes, but this was very much the thing. I have had people say when they were assigned back to Washington after one or two tours, their personnel officer would say "Well, you've been abroad for a while. We think you ought to come back and get a wife."

RANSOM: Get a wife. Exactly. Rocky Suddarth had to go through the experience of resigning from the Foreign Service when he married a foreign womaa French woman.

Q: When did enter the Foreign Service?

RANSOM: December, 1965.

Q: Can you give us an idea of your class at that time?

RANSOM: I was one of the last of the class to leave the Service. We had a group who mostly stayed in. The attrition in that class came very early. They had a variety of different career patterns. They all did fairly well in the Foreign Service. Most of them remain friends. We don't meet very much anymore, but it was a fun group.

Q: Were you primed for the Middle East by the time you got in?

RANSOM: Yes. I requested to go to what I thought was the most Arab World country — the most unchanged— and that was Yemen. The Department was only too happy to grant my wish. Nobody else wanted to go there. It was a kind of trial by fire. The whole embassy was thrown out in about 11 months after my arrival. So, I had my first experience in Foreign Service evacuation very early in my career. Yemen was a good introduction to the tumultuous politics of the Middle East as well as our activities in the Middle East. Again, there was a group of people in that embassy who became friends of mine. Rocky Suddarth was a political officer. David Newton was the economic officer. There was a guy named Lee Dinsmore, who is still alive. He is quite an elderly man now living out in

Wisconsin. He was a good friend. Matt Gerlach was the administrative officer. You lived with these people in ways that an outsider would never understand.

There was often literally nothing to do. There was no TV. There were no VCRs. There was not much radio. The only recourse you had for society and succor was your Foreign Service colleagues. Members of the CIA station and the military got together. It was an era where hard drinking was part of the job. Marjorie and I did more than our share of that.

Q: You're mentioning Marjorie. Had you gotten married?

RANSOM: Yes, I had gotten married. When I was in graduate school, I went one summer to study Arabic at Princeton under the National Defense Education Act and there was a lovely student, Marjorie Marilley. She was in the class ahead of me, having gone into Columbia a year before me. She was working on a master's degree at Johns Hopkins, also in Middle Eastern studies. So, we found there was a lot to talk about. It was summertime. Flowers were blooming. It was a lovely, lovely time. We subsequently married. She joined the Foreign Service as well and served in USIA.

While I was going through basic school in the Marine Corps, she was in an introductory class for the USIA Foreign Service in Washington. I used to drive up in the evenings after work to see Marjorie. She went off to become the first woman to serve in the Middle East as a Foreign Service officer. Yesterday she was promoted to career minister while serving in Amman, Jordan. She called up the man who had been her boss in USIA and noted that 35 years earlier as she had started out, he had been more than fair, supportive, and helpful to a young woman who was shy and uncertain about her surroundings. She hoped he would take some happiness in the fact that she had lasted and gone so far. He was delighted.

Q: How did it work when you joined the Foreign Service...

RANSOM: At that time, there was a written regulation in the Foreign Service Manual that required women officers to resign when they married. Men who married were not required to resign. It was considered “unseemly” for a Foreign Service female officer to be married. “Unseemly” was the term. They thought what men did at home at night in bed with their wives wasn't considered unseemly.

Q: It was “seemly.”

RANSOM: It was “seemly.” We weren't social revolutionaries in any sense of the word. She had two tours in the Foreign Service and was assigned to India. I had finished up my tour in Okinawa. There is a story here, too.

Marines in that day and age were never given orders as to where they went for their next post, but they were always supposed to volunteer for that service. So, when you got your orders, you wrote out a request to go to where they had decided to send you. So, each tour was therefore defined as “voluntary” in the Marine Corps. At the division headquarters in Okinawa, there were just hundreds of papers coming across the desk of the personnel officer - e.g. whoever requested assignment to the Continental United States, to such and such a base, via the Pacific. I sent a request for assignment to such and such a base in the Continental United States via the Atlantic. Nobody noticed and it was approved. So, I pocketed that and went hitchhiking on military airplanes to get to where Marjorie was at that time— in India. She made her way up from Bombay to Delhi when I finally got in on an airplane. Some Navy plane was flying there for some reason from Thailand. I went to the pilot and said, “Can you let me sit in the back?” He said, “Sure, Lieutenant. Hop in.” So, there we were in New Delhi.

We became engaged there. She finished out her tour of duty, having seamstresses stitch up her wedding dress in the heat of Bombay while she really wondered whether this was the right thing to do. She resigned from the Foreign Service because she had to. She quit because that's what women did in those days. I thought that was perfectly reasonable.

She went back to Norfolk. We married. We started a family. Several years later, after three children, Marjorie received a letter from USIA saying, “We may have discriminated against you under the 1965 Civil Rights Act as interpreted by various court cases.” The letter didn't say anything else. So, Marjorie said, “Well, what do we do?” To be honest, I didn't know what we would do if she went back to work. I couldn't think of any redress. This was all unknown at the time. So, I eventually decided on something that I thought was terribly clever. Again, this is an example of the stupid things that you do that work out well in the long run. I drafted a letter for her which said, “Yes, indeed, I was discriminated against and that is provable. As a remedy, I would like to be reinstated in the Foreign Service, full-time, at a rank that assumes all the promotions that I would have received had I been serving.” I thought that was the end of it.

In fact, Marjorie, after seven years, was reinstated with all the promotions that I had made and which had been so hard to get on my own in the State Department during that period. That started something that was simply nightmarish: our life together as a tandem couple. Our life would be marked by this experience. Marjorie brought in the soft side of diplomacy. You know what USIS does. They are journalists, educators, artists, writers, people who have nothing to do with power in the present generation but think they see and control the future. And they're right.

My friends and acquaintances were the “heavies”: the businessmen, the generals, the diplomats, the people who have all the power in the world in their generation but are mortally afraid of the tomorrow. So Marjorie's and my lives fit together not just with our different clientele, but as part of a working partnership in the Foreign Service working in the Middle East. It was glorious. Two incomes. One special, wonderful life.

Q: Your first tour in the Foreign Service was in Yemen serving there for eleven months from 1966. Then the embassy was closed.

RANSOM: I left in 1967, when the Secretary of State pulled out the entire embassy after two AID mission members had been imprisoned and some 24 other members of the AID mission had been declared persona non grata. I have always regretted that on a list of 24 troublemakers at that time, my name was not included. It would have been a world of honor to have been tagged persona non grata by a government that so dishonored its own country, as the al-Salal regime did at that time.

I left. I left all of our things behind, hoping they would be sent later. Marjorie and I had just been married. I was a very, very junior officer in the embassy—the most junior. I had been working in rotational assignments in the embassy, first in administration and then in consular affairs. I had a naive faith that nothing would happen to our effects and that they would be packed up and shipped. In fact, despite having packed up, nothing was shipped. We left our first post with only the earthly goods we could carry on our evacuation flight. So Marjorie I faced a difficult second tour financially, having to replace all that was lost in Yemen.

Q: When you arrived there in 1966, what had you heard about Yemen and how would you describe both our relations with the government and the government itself at that time and Yemen in general?

RANSOM: Yemen had only opened up to the outside world a few years before. Our embassy was situated in the town of Taiz not so far from the much more developed British port city of Aden. But the actual government was in the capital of Yemen, Sanaa, about two and a half hours north by road. There was a new American road which had been built even though there was not a single car or truck in the country. So, Yemen was primitive in the extreme in its development. It is mountainous country divided by tribes and regions. There was a continuous internal struggle, often with lethal weapons. The republican government, which had overthrown the old imam, maintained itself with help from the Egyptian army. The rebels, the loyalists, were supported by Saudi Arabia. So, we found ourselves in many ways in a difficult position, but we had very good relations with

the Saudis. We also tried to maintain good relations with the Egyptians and the Republic of Yemen. It didn't work terribly well. A straddle of this kind was impossible to maintain not just in Yemen but in the Middle East in general. Nasser and our government were in competition and eventually Nasser decided to get support from the Soviets rather than try to engage the Americans, whom he saw as overly friendly to Israel. Nasser was also after the Saudis and other conservative governments. He thought he was the wave of the future, representing increasing military elements, progressive Arab nationalism, and socialism. His target was not so much Yemen as Saudi Arabia and the port city of Aden. When it became clear the British were going to withdraw from Aden, he wanted to be the successor government there. That created all kinds of strains in our relationship with the Egyptian government. Not only were the Egyptians going after our good friends, the Saudis; they were going after our good friends, the British.

We had an AID mission in Yemen, and we were trying to make the best of a difficult situation. The Egyptians decided that the American embassy in Yemen was getting in their way. Furthermore they were unhappy with the American government after we turned down the sale of surplus wheat to Egypt. So they moved against the American embassy. Based on some trumped up charges, they put a couple of AID members in jail. They PNG'd some others. They got what they wanted, which was the decision by the secretary of state to withdraw American personnel.

Q: When you arrived in 1966, how were things going? Had the Egyptians started this campaign already?

RANSOM: They had started the campaign. I arrived in early 1966. By August of 1966, the Egyptians stooped to the most egregious form of intervention in Yemeni affairs. They put virtually the entire government of Yemen - all the ministers, the prime minister, many of the deputy ministers - on two airplanes and flew them to Cairo nominally for a conference there with Egyptian counterparts. But once they had landed, they put them all in jail.

Q: Not under pleasant house arrest, but just in jail?

RANSOM: No, it was in jail. They weren't mistreated terribly, except for the misery that comes in being falsely imprisoned. But that gave the Egyptians the unchallenged opportunity to run the country as well as they could. It was a very unhappy and difficult time.

The denouement came in 1967; then the Egyptians challenged the Israelis directly. Nasser badly overestimated his power. He closed the Straits of Tiran. He lost the war.

Q: This was known as the Six Day War.

RANSOM: He lost the war and had to withdraw from Yemen as a consequence. His great adventure in Yemen came to nothing despite the loss of a very large number of Egyptian soldiers.

Q: Was there a war going on while you were there?

RANSOM: There wasn't much fighting, but there was a large army of occupation - 50-60,000 men with airplanes, tanks, garrisons, the usual sort of intelligence and whatnot. There were some clashes in the east of the country where the local — and very independent — tribes would pick a fight with the Egyptians. The Egyptians generally stayed in the cities and tried to maintain themselves there with as little fighting as possible.

Q: How were our relations with the Egyptians from your perspective? Did we have any?

RANSOM: Relations with the Egyptians were difficult in those days. They were hard to love because of the imperial role that they were playing and because they saw themselves increasingly pitted against us everywhere in the Middle East with Soviet support. So, it was a diplomatic task of some difficulty. The Yemenis particularly felt that we were the aggrieved party. In fact, that turned out to be true.

Q: During the time you were there, what was the Saudi role?

RANSOM: The Saudis had come the conclusion that the Egyptians were really after the Saudi kingdom even more than they were after Yemen. Yemen was just a great stepping stone in that direction. The Saudis thought the Egyptians wanted to set up republics in Saudi Arabia as well as in Yemen. So, they undertook to subsidize the tribes of Yemen who opposed both the Egyptians and the concept of a republic. The Saudis created, in effect, a buffer between themselves and the Egyptians and sought to strengthen popular standing by a low level of warfare.

When the Egyptians were forced to leave after the 1967 War, finally pulling out in November, the Saudis funded one last spasmodic effort by the tribes to take the city of Sanaa. But the city held out on its own against all odds and expectations. The republicans inside the walls of the city just didn't give in to the tribes. That was more or less the end of the societal calm in Yemen, even though the Saudis maintained their support for the royalists and the tribesmen. It was the long, slow process of shifting to a new relationship between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Yemen. It has never been easy, natural, and popular, but its pretty much a set formula now.

Q: Could you talk a bit about the embassy? Who was the ambassador? What were we doing and trying to do?

RANSOM: We had no ambassador in Yemen. We had a charg# d'affaires named Harlan Clark, a man who had had a considerable amount of experience in the Middle East and had been picked at one point by the Foreign Service leadership as a “comer”. He had been sent off to other parts of the world like Tokyo. That did not seem to have worked terribly well. Harlan Clark ended up back in the Middle East and in a very small part of the Middle East at that, running an embassy that was under a great deal of pressure. He left shortly after I had arrived. It wasn't exactly clear to me why, but I think that some people in Washington had been unhappy with his management of the mission and the leadership

there. Clark was assigned to a diplomatic advisor's job at some university in the United States. His job was never filled, but the duties were simply given to a wonderful man named Lee Dinsmore. He had been a political officer in Yemen. He was a canny Middle Eastern hand, a very sweet and thoughtful guy, a leader in difficult times, and someone with whom I am still friends after all these years.

Q: What type of relations did we have with whatever passed for the Yemeni government when it wasn't in jail?

RANSOM: Well, there wasn't much of a Yemeni government after that purge in August of 1966. We tried to find it and have a dialogue with some of its members, but in fact, we were dealing with a very shadowy group. There was a president, Abdullah Salah. He offered several spontaneous reassurances. But in fact, the Egyptians were calling the shots

Q: Was there a feeling at that time that we were marking time or just displaying the flag or was there more a feeling of, well, this is a rough patch and we'll last it out and things will get better?

RANSOM: The discussion in the Middle East Bureau at the time revolved around the question of polarization and where our bets should be placed given what people saw of the future of the area. These are two different questions. Polarization meant that we didn't want to see a Middle East divided between conservatives and radicals and we didn't want one group to be backed by us and the other to be backed by the Soviet Union. There was a fear among a lot of the Arabists at the time that we would end up as the friend of Israel and of conservative Arabs and neither one had much of a chance of surviving the tide of events in the Middle East. Both the Israelis and conservative states like the Saudis as well as our friends, the British, wanted very much for us to take sides forcefully. We ended up being pushed in that direction whether we wanted to or not. Our speculation about the outcome of the changing scene in the Middle East was not all wrong, but rather ill-

conceived. In the final analysis, it was mostly wrong because the Egyptian regime and the radical Arab regimes over a period of many decades failed while other regimes—the family states on the peninsula in particular, and in Jordannot only survived, but in fact flourished. Our short-term bets worked out, helped by the fact that the Soviets simply folded over a period of time.

Q: In Aden, there had been a rather violent or radical group fighting the British. Was that going on while you were there?

RANSOM: Yes, it was, and that was a full-scale war with the radical groups supported out of the north by the Egyptians. That was a cause of complaint by the British about us and our association with the republican Yemeni government. The British had decided to change their “east of Suez” policy and withdrew from Aden. From that time on, they had to focus on setting up a successor government. The one they set up didn't really work. It was to be a federation of sheikhs who ruled local areas in that part of the world. In the end, they were overcome by local radical forces. The British eventually tipped the scales by throwing their weight behind the anti-Nasser radical forces who were closer to them. They were communists. So, the British, when they left, played something of a contradictory role in their desire to see Nasser and his minions defeated. They succeeded in that, but at the price of creating in Yemen a state that was in 25-30 years to become one of the most unsuccessful and troublesome pseudo-communist states in the world.

Q: It's a little hard to capture, at the turn of the century, the feeling of the British and to a lesser extent the Americans had about Nasser. He was not considered a benign influence in the Arab world.

RANSOM: I had come out of graduate school thinking that countries like Egypt were probably representing the wave of the future; that they were going to set up systems and institutions that were badly needed in the Arab world as a whole - schools, hospital systems, road systems, national development programs— all of which had never really

been built under British and other foreign rule, I thought that nationalism in general was something that couldn't and shouldn't be thwarted, but should be embraced and channeled. My hope ideologically was that we could find a way to assist the establishment of a new regime of the Middle East. I am afraid that that hope was rather dashed when I got to Yemen for several reasons.

First, the Egyptians didn't want to cooperate with us. They were spoiling for a fight. Second, they were associating themselves with the Soviets which made me extremely uneasy about the overall balance of power in that part of the world. The Soviet embassy was huge in Sanaa and was very active in supplying military equipment, economic aid, scholarships, etc. In that contest, I didn't like coming out second best. Third, the Egyptians were imperialist in ways the British never dreamed. They were heavy-handed, false, and shameless in their willingness to intervene in the society in order to impress their opponents so that they could get their way. As I said earlier, they packed the entire government aboard airplanes and flew them off to prison in Cairo. That was something that changed my views about the Middle Eastjust in the course of one day.

It was an education for me, a young man without a lot of experience in the Middle East. The academic lessons I learned in graduate school were tested in the crucible of Yemeni politic. I must say that everything I saw in that first assignment to Yemen served me terribly well in the rest of my career in the Middle East. My views didn't really change very much after that experience and the issues didn't either - not until the Berlin Wall came down.

I also made very good friends in the embassy. We had an extraordinarily close relationship among the staff. There wasn't very much to do in Sanaa or Taiz except to see your colleagues in the evening. We were young and gabby. Everybody in the embassy was a friend. Rocky Suddarth, who became ambassador to Jordan and now is president of the Middle East Institute, was there at the time as a political officer. He only had two posts before, but I looked on him as kind of a veteran. David Newton was the economic officer.

He became head of our mission in Iraq and ended his career serving in Yemen again. He was another good friend. He still remains a good friend.

Q: Where is he now?

RANSOM: He's in Prague heading up Radio Free Iraq. He retired and then was offered his post and took it up very quickly. Matt Gerlach, the administrative officer for whom I worked, had a full career in the Foreign Service and was a wonderful friend to me both there and elsewhere. Lee Dinsmore was a great friend as well, a mentor and a model. Marjorie and I were starting out life in the Foreign Service. We struck a balance in our relationship with ourselves and our work in Yemen which served us extremely well for the rest of our careers. So, I look on those troubled times with a certain degree of fondness and even amazement of how rich an experience it was.

Q: I take it you really couldn't get out and travel much there in the countryside.

RANSOM: That's right. There was a road that had been paved and there was a road that was being built across the wasteland. It was hard to do travel on it. I made that trek twice. Then there was the back and forth between Taiz and Sanaa; there it was possible to travel on the road that we had built. If you got off the road, there were no roads. There were tracks to follow if you were desperate. While I was eager to get out and see as much of the countryside as possible and even walk in some places to perform my consular duties, it took a long time to get to a house where I had to do an investigation. Yemen wasn't a country where you could get about easily. You had to carry everything with you. It was a very, very mountainous and broken country. It was beautiful and lovely but not a place with a lot for tourists.

One of the things that startled me about Yemen was the discovery that a very large number of Yemenis had gone to the United States. They had begun their journeys by getting on British ships in the port of Aden working as stewards and deck-hands. Then they ended up jumping ship in some American port. Where one went, others would follow.

Yemenis are a great nation of immigrants. When Vietnam fell, over 2,000 Yemenis came back to Yemen. They had made it that far and were working there in menial jobs. The American Yemeni group tended to work in Detroit at the Ford Motor Company and in various steel mill towns along the Ohio River. There was also a big group in Brooklyn, New York. There was a small group that had begun in California. They were isolated communities and were prototypical immigrant groups who sent a lot of money home. When they returned home, they married Yemeni women and set themselves up lived well on the fairly good estate they had made in the United States. They were never very well integrated into American society, but some became American citizens. We had all kinds of consular issues to deal with because of that.

Q: I would think that you would have an awful time with documentation. When I was in Dhahran, I would have people coming in who were Yemeni and obviously not Saudi because of their headdress and even their looks. They would come in with scraps of paper. It was not a very easy group to fit into our paper bureaucracy.

RANSOM: No, it wasn't and we struggled mightily against visa fraud. I suppose we may have had some successes, but the Yemenis were very clever. By and large, when they set their minds on going to the United States, they managed to do so. In that embassy we had a very, very large immigrant visa business and a very, very small non-immigrant visa work-loada few businessmen and government people who went from Yemen to the States, but a lot of family members who wanted to visit.

Q: Could you get out and go into the souk, move around in the town or not?

RANSOM: Yes. In fact, I went to Yemen thinking I was going to do rotational assignments in all four parts of the embassy. I didn't have enough time there to get through the Political or Economic Section. I spent most of my tour in the Administrative Section doing GSO work. The Administrative Section was located in Taiz. Harlan Clark, the Charg#, resisted the move of the embassy from Taiz, where he was very comfortably ensconced, to Sanaa,

where living would be difficult. When he left, the embassy began to push forward to make this move. I was sent up by Matt Gerlach to Sanaa to rent houses and office space, repair them, and put them in condition ready for American occupancy. That meant taking a building without a single pipe and wire, without screens, without anything but mud floors, with the most rudimentary walls and security protection, and completely rehabilitating it. I must have had 18 houses and a big office building to work on and I did it, not knowing that this really was the work of an entire administrative section. I simply got landlords to do things. We hired a big bunch of workers and I went out and just did my part as a lieutenant should do in the Marine Corps or the State Department, which is get the job done. So, I was in the souk a lot. I also took rented trucks and went down to Aden and bought up fabric for curtains, screens, pipes, basins, toilets, wiring, switches, everything else, dodging terrorist incidents as I went. It was sort of a foolish set of activities. The embassy never did decide whether to be horrified or amazed by what I was doing. But it had to move. They were finding that in Sanaa, homes and office space was being made available which was suited to American requirements and so they let me go.

I had lots and lots of friends in the souk and I loved going down there. I must tell you that I started out completely inexperienced with bargaining for things and making things work under difficult circumstances. I learned a series of lessons that has served me very well in my subsequent career. It's the opposite of Wal-Mart where you walk in and everything is laid out and the price is already determined. If you pay at the counter, you walk away with the stuff. Yemen was totally different. Setting the price, paying the money, getting delivery, checking the goods, making them work — all of that was something that I found new, frustrating, fun, and instructive.

Q: How about when you went down to Aden? Were we in contact with the British or were the British acting a little bit standoffish about our activities.

RANSOM: We had a consulate in Aden, so when I went down there I saw people in the consulate. The British, of course, were good friends of ours. They were much beleaguered

there and a little unhappy that we were going to be friends of people who were not their friends,—the Egyptians and the Yemeni Republicans. But the British never did anything to make our life difficult; at the borders, taking things in and out, etc. They simply allowed all this to happen smoothly.

Q: Why were we moving to Sanaa to Taiz?

RANSOM: Sanaa was the capital. The government was there. We had long been in Taiz because the old imam never wanted foreigners to live in his holy capital of Sanaa. The embassy sort of set up there and houses were fixed up. The charg#'s house in particular was fixed up very well. He didn't want to leave. So, when the policy decision was made to move, it was hard to shift him.

Q: Were you kicked out right along with so many embassies right at the aftermath of the '67 War?

RANSOM: No, we were kicked out before that. Actually, I always say we were kicked out, but in fact, it was the U.S. government's decision to withdraw the American mission, following provocative acts on the part of the Egyptian government which barred us from protecting our people and carrying out our mission. Secretary Dean Rusk pulled us out. But that happened in May. It was not until a month later that the war broke out. Then there were forced departures in many Middle Eastern countries. We were withdrawn before the war.

Q: This would have been in May 1967?

RANSOM: Yes. We departed first on an Ethiopian airliner, a C-47 that had flown over from Asmara, landing on a rainy day in Sanaa. It took us out after a lot of hindrance from local officials. We were sad to go. We thought that we were being pushed out. We were. We didn't like ceding the field to the other side. Marjorie and I were assigned to Tehran— our

stalwart friends in the Middle East. I served out a tour there and went on to study Arabic at our embassy in Beirut.

Q: You went to Tehran in mid-1967?

RANSOM: This must have been July or so of 1967.

Q: How long were you in Tehran?

RANSOM: It was only to serve out the remnant of my first tour; so they stuck me in the Consular Section. I was there for less than a year. Then we were put into Arabic language training in Beirut starting in the spring of 1968.

Q: How did you find Tehran?

RANSOM: You have to remember that I had come from Yemen. We were terribly impressed by how much more Tehran was developed and organized and how much more promising its future appeared. The Shah was leading at the time what he called his “White Revolution,” transferring land from rural feudal landholders over to new groups of people. Development was surging. He was phasing out the old society. The Iranians looked stronger all the time, not weaker. I was very impressed with what was going on.Khomeini was a name I heard at that time. He had been exiled, which created problems, as he seemed to be much beloved.

What we saw around us was a tremendous surge in education, investment and development. It looked very good. I came away impressed by the fact that the Middle East was a place where you needed to have friends and they needed to be strong friends. So, I became a supporter of the Iranian government.

Q: Who was our ambassador at that point?

RANSOM: Armin Meyer was our ambassador. He was a very able man, very thoughtful. He had a perfectly dreadful wife named Alice - named “Tiny Alice” by anybody in the embassy who knew her. She was a woman who made impossible demands on junior officers and on their wives to show up at her parties and to play servant roles like serving drinks and food. In those days, officers by and large accepted that. It was life as they knew it and they accepted it. There were references and whole paragraphs in the efficiency reports that related how well Marjorie and I had done. I didn't like it. Marjorie didn't like it either. She had been a USIA officer and she didn't want to be treated in the old fashion. On day, Mrs. Meyer tried to collect all of the junior officers in the embassy to tell them that they were coming to her house for a New Year's Eve party and that the theme was going to be the Wild West, requiring us to dress up as cowboys to make up an appropriate backdrop. The women were to dress up as cigarette girls and pass around trays of smoking things to the guests. I decided that I wasn't going to do that. Marjorie and I went off to Tabriz to spend New Year's there We sent a little note to “Tiny Alice” that we would not be there. I think she saw through the subterfuge and didn't like it. But that incident was a reminder of why changes in the Foreign Service toward women and families was so badly needed.

The DCM at the time was a wonderful man named Nicholas Thatcher. I liked him and got to know him rather well, even though I was a very junior officer. There was a wonderful consular officer named Maurice Healand. He was an Oklahoman with a great beard. Nobody wore beards then. He was very humane, thoughtful, warm, funny, and a tough administrator. He had a deputy, a career consular official, named Laurie DeWitt, who also became a good friend. In fact, when I think about the Foreign Service and all of my assignments, my recollection is flooded with the memory of people who became very good friends, whom we saw again and again in the course of our lives, not because we served together, but because we sought each other out to say “Hello” and to catch up. Communications at the time were quite “primitive” compared to today. It was difficult to call your home in the United States. No one used the telephone to call back to Washington.

People went for vacations in the region, out of the country maybe, but nobody went back to the United States. It wasn't a time when people just automatically got on airlines and flew somewhere. To fly to the United States took several days, using propeller airplanes which had to refuel en route several times. You were completely removed from America. There were no VCRs, very few movies, no radio broadcasts, no Internet. The result was that you immersed yourself in the embassy community and learned the local culture. The Foreign Service indeed had an identity and a sort of corporate personality that was palpably real. Now, as I ended my career as U.S. ambassador in Bahrain, I find that junior officers have the same levels of ability as they did when I entered the Service, but they have never created for themselves a close knit local community for themselves and other diplomats. They don't have to. They never really leave the States. They go back twice a year on bargain tickets. It takes 12-14 hours to fly back to see their relatives and friends, have a good time and then return to post. I don't know if they will have the same set of recollections and friends in 30-40 years as Marjorie and I have from when we started in the Foreign Service.

Q: I agree with you. Had you planned to take Arabic early on?

RANSOM: Yes. I had Arabic in graduate school. Marjorie had also studied it. It was our intention to become Arabists and to work in the Middle East and that was, in fact, how our careers worked out. We never had much reason to leave the area; our professional career was quite promising.

Q: You went to Beirut when?

RANSOM: It would have been 1968.

Q: You were there one year.

RANSOM: Eleven months. It was a two year course, but both Marjorie and I were very good at the language and we got up to very high levels of proficiency - 4/4 - in 11 months

After 11 months, we were exhausted by the race to learn more and more words every night and with more and more lessons. So we asked to go to our next post, which turned out to be Jeddah.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Arabic language training. Could you describe the students who were taking it with you? Where were they coming from? Discuss the often used accusation that we turn out anti-Israel, pro-Arabists and all that.

RANSOM: It's hard to avoid that charge. We made friends with Lebanese Muslims and Christians who had very little love for Israel. We were learning the vocabulary of political and economic affairs and so our source of information were Arabic newspapers, which did not admire Israel.

The teachers were very devoted and very good. They felt that they were developing the future American diplomatic corps in the Middle East. Under the guise of teaching Arabic, they worked through their own lives, attitudes, and political philosophies. Those were the main subjects of our discussions. There was in the Levant a tremendous antipathy towards American support of Israel. It was everywhere in society, so the teachers weren't doing anything egregiously different. They were only reflecting their own background and world view. They had all been humiliated by the Six Day War and the Israeli victory. Nasser was a fallen god. There was a great deal of bitterness. They didn't know exactly how to approach the next stage. They were saddled with impossible political positions which governed their response to all Israeli proposals for settlement and peace. That locked the Arabs into a confrontation which, in the end, they found they couldn't win. But in the late 1960's that was impossible to admit. So, they had stalemate in politics.The fact is, however, that whatever the tone of the training might have been, no one in that course was ever influenced to do anything against instructions or against his or her conception of common interests. We did have the rare opportunity to get to know Arabs, deal with Arabs, talk to Arabs, and understand Arabs. It was not balanced by a comparable experience with the Israelis. At that time, to go to Israel for an assignment meant that you couldn't really

be sure you would be accepted in an Arab post afterwards; so the divide was set. It is my view that the Foreign Service is a group of servants of the United States government working in foreign affairs. We did what we were told to do to implement a given policy. We may have had a chance to debate it, but once we received instructions, we carried them out faithfully and fully.

Q: I think this was essentially Israeli propaganda. If you're not 100% with us, then you're against us. I don't think it works anymore, but in the old days, the Arabists were tainted with this.

RANSOM: I think that's true. I tried at several points in my career to get an assignment to Israel. It never was possible. I wanted to rub some of the “Arabist” tarnish off and I wanted my own experience with seeing the other side. It never worked. It was just the vagaries of the assignment process and the timing. When Marjorie went back in to USIA on a full-time basis, we had to work out our assignments together, which we did very happily. It made for a wonderful life and wonderful careers, but it wasn't always easy for one person to take up a post somewhere when he or she might have preferred another one, but we had to go where there two positions available at a post. So, that limited our preferences.

Q: When did she come into the Foreign Service?

RANSOM: She actually worked on a contract basis on every post that we were in. When we returned to the United States for assignment, she was offered a reappointment in the USIA Foreign Service and took it. That was a dramatic story. By that time, we had three children who were living in downtown Washington.

Q: This was when?

RANSOM: This was about 1972. She received a letter from USIA saying that it thought on examination of the files that they may have discriminated against her under the 1965 Civil Rights Act as amended and interpreted by court cases. In fact, she had retired from

the Foreign Service under the provisions of a written regulation that said that female Foreign Service officers who married had to resign. Male Foreign Service officers did not. The apparent reason for this was the belief at that time that a woman could not be an effective diplomat when the man in front of her in the Foreign Office imagined her engaging in conjugal relations in the evening. So, it was blatantly discriminatory. The irony was that when we married, neither one of us really thought about her doing anything else except retiring and setting up house. That is what women did in those days. They went through undergraduate and graduate school, but they didn't really pursue careers except to perhaps find the man they were going to marry and then they went home. She had done that. I thought that was the right thing to do. So, when the time came when she could go back to work, I wasn't at all sure it was the right move. I didn't have any idea how we were going to raise our kids. She was also reluctant because of that issue. But I finally suggested to her that she write a letter to USIA saying that indeed she and others had been discriminated against and that, on the advice of her counsel, she was now seeking reinstatement on a full-time basis at a rank which assumed that she would have received all the promotions she would have gotten in the interim years.

I must tell you that I thought that would be the end of it. But, instead, USIA agreed. Marjorie then was faced with the decision of what to do and she decided with my rather reluctant support that she should go back to work. It meant a great change in our life. I know our families did not think it was a good idea. But we decided we would try it. We barely broke even the first year of her return because of the extra expenses that we incurred by her going back to work - housekeepers, laundry service, etc. It really put a price on what she had brought economically to the marriage. But it was the beginning of a magnificent life. Our careers complimented each other and supported each other. Our daughters loved it; they saw both a mother and father had jobs, and that both functioned as friends, as partners, as mother and father, and as officials as well. I am deeply grateful to the Foreign Service for finally coming around to the right conclusions..

Q: While you were in Beirut, this was the 1968-1969 period, what was the situation there?

RANSOM: The civil war in Beirut did not really start until 1975; so we were a long way from that. The Lebanese economy was booming because the oil money from the Gulf came there to be invested both in real estate and in banks. The Syrians were quiescent after their defeat in the Six Day War. They were going through their own turmoil at home and were in no position to threaten anyone. Lebanon was a little bastion of western sympathy run by a Christian group that felt itself not Arab but something different and not eager to march in step with Egypt, especially against Israel. The border with Israel was quiet. It was a very nice period. There were a lot of strains in the body politic, but the Maronite Christians felt they had a special power and responsibility - the Shia didn't count, the Sunnis were collaborators, the Orthodox came along with the Armenians, and the Palestinians were a thorn in Lebanon. It would be years after the late 1960s before the status quo would break down. At the time we were there, it didn't look half bad. It was a great place to live. There were restaurants and hotels all over the country. We traveled everywhere. We had again found people extraordinarily friendly. Lebanon was a sweet place.

Q: You were assigned to Jeddah as your first post after language training.

RANSOM: That's right. I went there initially for a few months to fill a gap in the Consular Section. But I was getting very tired of doing that type of work. I was promised that I would be reassigned to the Political Section shortly. So, we threw ourselves into the task of meeting as many people as possible and of getting around the country as much as possible. The ambassador was Hermann Eilts.

Q: You were in there from when to when?

RANSOM: It was not quite three years, 1969-1971. It did not end well. Our efforts to get around the country, to do things, to meet people and such produced a complaint

against us from Saudi security just at the time Hermann Eilts was leaving and before a new ambassador, Nick Thatcher — my good friend from Tehran — could arrive. The security services' charge was that Marjorie was Jewish and that I worked for the CIA. Nick Thatcher took me out to lunch while we were back in the States on home leave and then said, to me “I don't want to start out by arguing the case that neither of these accusations are true. I don't want to blot my copy book from the beginning. Therefore you have to withdraw from this assignment and get another assignment in the States.”

I was crushed, and concerned by what this might do to my career. I was very unhappy. I was allowed to return to Jeddah, pack up, and leave. I think it is became pretty common knowledge in the Department that this had happened. It never made any difference in my subsequent career that I could see. I went back to Saudi Arabia many, many times. At one stage of my career I was responsible for the work of the Saudi country director. I considered myself a friend of the Saudis in ideological terms. I still do. But it was a fairly disagreeable experience and one I'm not sure I managed with full dignity at the time. I was angry and unhappy about it.

We returned to Washington. I was assigned as the Yemen desk officer and quickly found out that jobs in the United States for Foreign Service officers are very different from their jobs in the field. I worked hard. I later became the Jordan desk officer and went on from there to join the National Security Council staff. So, in fact, my misadventure in Saudi became an experience of great change and not a setback at all.

Q: I want to go back to the Saudi times. You were there from 1969 to late 1970. How did you find Saudi Arabia at that time?

RANSOM: The big hike in oil prices had not taken place yet ; still the Saudis were wealthy, but they had only begun their great drive to develop their country. It was not entirely clear at the time whether the regime could maintain itself against a nationalist tide which was alive even though the radical Arabs had been greatly wounded in the aftermath of the “Six

Day" war. The overthrow of the government in Libya, King Idriss, seemed to be a sign that no conservative regime in the region, no family-based monarchy, was safe. The on-and-off chances of King Hussein of Jordan were always dicey. Everybody remembered what had happened in Iran in 1958. The region looked shaky. The Saudis were hard to get to know—close, small families, and they didn't really welcome strangers. Tourism was not easy. Distances were great. Facilities were primitive. We did as much as we could to travel around the country and do things, but I wouldn't say that it was our happiest assignment.

Q: You started out in the Consular Section. Did they eventually get you into the Political Section?

RANSOM: Yes, I did. I worked with Long and Barnum, both very capable guys who became good friends. I wasn't in the Political Section very long before Nick Thatcher was invited to find me an assignment someplace else.

Q: What was your wife doing at that time?

RANSOM: She was raising kids and going around. She had made a small effort of her own to meet the women in Jeddah. She went assiduously to women's homes and tried to learn about their families and such. It was part of an effort to extend beyond the embassy. I was doing it with much less success on the male side.

Q: It's hard for somebody who hasn't been in the business to understand such efforts. When you've learned a language, you want to get out there and use it. What you were doing was part of that effort.

RANSOM: I think so. I don't know to this day if there was ever any one incident or one person that led to produce the charge that the Saudis levied against us. I know that I never said anything that was hostile to the Saudis, broke any of their rules that I know of; we did tried to make some friends, but we ran afoul somewhere of the Byzantine Saudi intelligence system. That was very, very unfortunate.

Years later, after I finished my tour of duty as country director of the Arabian Peninsula, I went to Bandar Bin Sultan, the Saudi ambassador in Washington, and said, “Now that I am going on to issues outside of NEA, I have a favor to ask you. I'd like you to set the record straight after all these years.” He and I had had a very good and close working relationship. We had done a lot of things together. I liked him very much and vice versa. He had been a guest in my house for dinner. I had gone to his house with Marjorie. He was appalled when he heard what had happened to me years earlier and he sent a number of cables trying to make it clear that the charge should be wiped from the files. I never heard anything about it. Nothing was ever done or said. I continued to go in and out of Saudi Arabia without difficulty, but I was looking at it as a matter of pride and some vindication after all these years. I never really got it.

Q: At that time, was the embassy looking at Saudi Arabia as being vulnerable?

RANSOM: Yes. Everybody thought that they were a weak reed. That view was wrong, as was eventually proved. But it was a very American view that if the Saudi leadership didn't change its ways, they were going to be replaced by the new class of educated men from families other than the royal one. We saw the threat coming to Saudi Arabia from the left. The Saudis saw the threat to themselves coming from the right, from the religious fundamentalists and tribes. We were wrong. Our whole effort in the kingdom was intended to support them against leftist forces. They agreed that that was our role and cooperated with us in that. They didn't want us to interfere in what they did inside the kingdom to defend themselves from the right. So, it was in some ways a difficult relationship because we were not in complete agreement on the threat and how to do things. Our ambassador, Hermann Eilts, was a superb, wonderful man. He was a first-class ambassador.

Q: Everyone I've talked to has this feeling about him. Were we looking at the Saudi military as being a possible source of a coup?

RANSOM: Yes. The Saudis were much more concerned about this possibility than we were. We wanted to move ahead in the training and equipping of the Saudi forces. They didn't want that. They wanted to make sure that the army in Saudi Arabia was never in a position to do what other armies had done in Syria, Egypt, and Libya.

The Saudi leadership was equally concerned by the build up of the national guard, the "White Army." We had a program for training and equipping them. It could not be run through our military mission. It had to be separate. In fact, the building up of the army seemed to us to be something that really was going on, but at the same time there were efforts to weaken the army which were even more important. In fact, what happened over a period of time is that the Saudi air force eventually developed into a fairly competent organization. The navy doesn't really count and the Saudi army continues to be hamstrung by all sorts of efforts. For example, the ammunition would be stored in places far away from the tanks. A centralized command and control system has never been set up. National guard forces were placed outside of the barracks with the army forces. All was done was to make a potential coup as difficult as possible.

Q: Were we looking at students who had been in the United States, England, or France, particularly those not associated with the royal family, as being the source of real concern about the left? Where was the left in Saudi society?

RANSOM: We fell into believing that the Saudi students who went to the United States would be bulwarks of the regime and friends of ours when they returned—not leftist, but good red-blooded American-educated kids. In fact, quite a number of them who came back joined fundamentalist clans. One of those students actually shot Youssef, a royal family member. That young man had been turned off by his own life in the United States and moved back in a very conservative direction. The leftist threat, we thought, came largely from outside from Egyptians, Syrians, Iraqis, and others who carried with them such ideological baggage. The threat was not from the Soviets in Saudi Arabia since

they were simply excluded from the kingdom—were not allowed to enter, establish an embassy, or do anything such as trade.

We were under a lot of pressure by the Saudi leadership to do things to protect them. They didn't object to our relationship with Iran, but they didn't want it to be an exclusive relationship. They were off again, on again about our relations with Jordan. They detested the Israelis, but they would do nothing to threaten the Israelis. They suspected the Syrians and the Egyptians deeply and rightly so. They had very ambiguous relationships with the Yemenis. They didn't dislike the British.

What you had in Saudi Arabia was a classic test of American diplomacy: i.e. to build a coalition out of disparate elements to make sure that those things which united the coalition were not overcome by those issues which inevitably tended to divide. I found American diplomacy in that respect to be more than inventive and vigorous. By and large, it was a highly pragmatic and successful effort. The bottom line is that here we are, 30 years later, with still strong ties of friendship which are of great mutual benefit. History has shown that they made the right bet when they bet on us and vice versa.

Q: Since there was no official opposition, how did one do political work there?

RANSOM: You had, of course, a certain amount of work that you did with government officials. There was not a social life which you could easily use to start and maintain contacts. Their headdress and even their looks militated against easy relationships. They would come in with scraps of paper. It was not a very easy group to fit into our paper bureaucracy.

Q: After Saudi, as you said, you were assigned to Washington and dealt with Jordanian affairs. How was Hussein doing at the time?

RANSOM: Hussein managed to survive that period splendidly. He was, among other things, a survivor, which in the Middle East has a certain nobility of its own. Many regimes

that preach lofty ambitions have fallen by the wayside. I think Hussein has been good for Jordan and good for the Arabs. His views of how the Israelis should be dealt with and how dealings between other Arab states should be managed have been vindicated by events. He managed not just to outlive his critics, but to convince most of them. That is an extraordinary feat in the Middle East.

Q: At this time, Jordan still claimed a protectorate over the West Bank. The Israelis were sitting there, but Jordan had not renounced its protectorate to the West Bank.

RANSOM: That is right. They claimed the West Bank as Jordanian territory as well as Jerusalem, even though both were occupied by Israel. They alone among the Arab states have given citizenship to Palestinians. Legal arguments have been made about who should have control of the West Bank and Jerusalem. But the fact is that now we are looking at the situation where once again the “land for peace” formula will be invoked by all parties - maybe more so by the Israelis after the election that takes place today - to justify a withdrawal from those territories which were occupied by Israel after the 1967 War.

Q: Did you find in the Near East Bureau that Jordanian interests sometimes collided with Israeli interests? Was this a battle that was fought out within the bureau?

RANSOM: It wasn't much fought out in my presence. It passed for high politics in the United States and those decisions about where we could back the Israelis and where we could not, were typically made by other people. But it was as automatic a decision in the Israeli favor in those days as it became later on. In the early 1970's, the Israelis were making a lot of demands on Arab states and on the Jordanians in particular. They didn't always get their way in their demands for aid or for sales of military equipment or for diplomatic support. But they had a very great asset at the time, which was that they were saying “yes” to negotiations for territorial settlement and for peace. The Arabs were, by and large, saying “no.” The situation was reversed later on by Netanyahu, in the late

1990s, when there was a tilt in the balance of power. But in the 1970's, the Israelis gave many people reason to support them and the Arabs did not.

Q: Were there any issues such as selling anti-aircraft missiles, advanced weapons systems, to Jordan which ran afoul of the Israeli lobby during this 1971-1973 period?

RANSOM: The Israelis didn't want aircraft and anti-aircraft defenses delivered that would make Jordan a threat to Israel or be less vulnerable to Israeli pressure. Therefore, our task was to put together a package of military equipment that would allow the Jordanians to maintain their defenses against Arab states but not become too great a challenge to the Israelis. That made it a tricky business. The Jordanians knew exactly what we were doing. So did we. By and large, we were able to succeed. The sale of the Hawk missiles was approved later based on a compromise that these missiles would become stationery. They would have to be cemented in place. This, the Israelis thought, was a clever way of making it possible for them to destroy the missiles if there was ever a war, but when the Jordanians got finished building these things into place, they had so resourcefully protected them that I'm not sure the Israeli ambition would have been realized. They still remained a potent weapon against Israeli air force planes. To my knowledge, however, no Hawk missile was ever fired at an Israeli airplane.

Q: Were you still on the desk during the October 1973 War?

RANSOM: Yes, I was.

Q: Can you talk about the buildup to that and how the bureau— you and others— were reacting to this?

RANSOM: The Israelis were adamant in their view that there was no likelihood of war, that the Arabs wouldn't dare do such a thing, and they were only making feints to see whether they could energize the United States to play a more active diplomatic role and to put pressure on the Israelis to be more forthcoming. The bureau did not read the

intelligence reports quite the same way. Eventually, we acquired intelligence reports from the Jordanians about Syrian and Egyptian war plans that were absolutely convincing. We went to the Israelis with these. They still refused to believe it. So, that war was not a surprise that can be laid at the feet of the Americans. We thought that was war coming. We had good, hard intelligence. We shared it with the Israelis. The surprise can be laid at the feet of the Israelis, who were simply so blinded by their own success in the 1967 War that they never really credited the Arabs with the nerve to resume the fight. The task then became one of keeping the Jordanians out of the war. They felt they needed at least some martyrs. We felt we didn't need any more battle fronts in the struggle. When the war opened, it opened with only two fronts.

Q: This was the Syrian front and the Egyptian front.

RANSOM: That's right. There were some skirmishes late in the war on the Israeli-Jordanian borders largely for show; there was no real Jordanian-Israeli war. The Jordanians claimed some casualties and claimed to have maneuvered mightily, but I don't think there was ever really the threat of a large third front.

In the early stages of the fighting, the Egyptians crossed the Suez Canal and the Syrians recovered most of the Golan Heights. The Israelis suddenly panicked and found that their airplanes which they had been used as artillery, thereby relieving the ground forces from dragging the artillery pieces around, were being forced to bomb from very high altitudes becoming relatively ineffectual. Arab armies were advancing against Israeli ground troops, both across the Canal and on the Golan. The Israelis were also caught short in their mobilization. They had maintained a very small standing army and it took them 48 or more hours to mobilize. There was a panicky period when the professional army could not initially hold or even inflict heavy casualties. So, a few days into the war, it looked very desperate.

The Israelis rose, however, magnificently to the military task. It helped a lot that the Jordanians were not deeply into the fray. An American military team went to Tel Aviv to give recommendations of how to conduct the war. Basically, it was to hold in the north, fight in the south to make sure that the Egyptians, once they had crossed the Canal, did not go deeper into the Sinai Peninsula. These were dramatic days. I became a watch-stander in the Operations Center— long stretches and at strange times of the day or night. Eventually, the Israelis ground out a victory. There was help from the Americans that led to a belated and reluctant decision on the part of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia to impose an oil embargo. But by and large, the Israelis did it by themselves. They began to push the Arabs back. Part of it was that the Arabs had very limited war-games and when their initial successes left them in good positions on land, they had no plans and no means to go further. They gave away the initiative to the Israelis, thinking that this was the time for diplomacy and that they would stop and talk. The Israelis were not ready to stop and talk. So, the war began to go against the Arabs.

Then there was this dramatic event when - and I was on duty at the time - a piece of intelligence came in from our watch stations on the Dardanelles. Soviet ships going through the Straits were detected by sensors to be carrying nuclear warheads. I thought rightly that the Soviets were shipping warheads to Egypt. That sent Kissinger into an extraordinary series of moves to bring the fighting to an end. It included a worldwide nuclear alert on our part and suggestions for talks which we knew the Arabs would accept. The war came to an end and the talking began. At this point, I went off to the NSC to work on different issues; so I wasn't as close to Jordanian matters after this.

Q: During this time of the October 1973 War, what were our communications to the Jordanians? Were we telling them “Cool it. Stay out of it?”

RANSOM: “Cool it. Stay out of it.”

Q: What were you getting from the Jordanians?

RANSOM: “We need martyrs.” The Jordanians remembered what happened in 1967 and they weren't about to plunge into war the same way they had before, but they also didn't feel they could simply stand aside particularly when Arab armies were going down to defeat. So, they mobilized, maneuvered, and did all kinds of things to put off any major conflicts. They did feel that they needed to fire some weapons at least. In fact, they were in a very tricky situation. The Israelis did not want to get at the Syrians straight across the Golan, but to make a right hook through northern Jordan into Syria. That was not all clear sailing. The border city of Dar'a is a natural boundary and it is very hard to cross. There are ravines and lava fields. But if you can do that, you have flanked the Syrian defenses both in Damascus and on the Golan. You would then be in a position to drive the Syrians back to Damascus and maybe even out of Damascus. This scenario made the Jordanians feel that they had to position themselves in strength in the north. They said it was against Syrian entry from that direction, but it was also against Israeli penetration, too. It was one of those ambiguous situations in which the King of Jordan and his advisors had dealt with so well for so long.

Q: I would have thought that we would have been doing an awful lot of “back and forth” between explaining to the Jordanians and explaining to the Israelis about “This is what they're doing. They are doing this for their own good. Don't do anything” on both sides. Telling the Israelis, “Don't flank here” and telling the Jordanians, “Don't push too hard.”

RANSOM: I know what we did with the Jordanians, but I was not as close to what we did with the Israelis. But I'm sure that a lot of that took place.

Q: We were telling the Jordanians “Don't be aggressive?” on the Jordan-Syria front”

RANSOM: We said they could mobilize in the northern part of Jordan and defend their own borders against a Syrian attempt or an Iraqi attempt to bring forces in. We didn't want the Israelis to provoke them nor did we want these forces to be used against Israel. From the northern part of Jordan, you look directly down into the marshaling yards and the supply

depots of the Israelis as they funneled forces up onto the Golan Heights. We didn't want the Jordanians throwing themselves at the Israelis from there.

Q: What about the West Bank? We had our consulate general in Jerusalem, which was reporting independently of the embassy. Were you keeping a watching brief on the West Bank as part of your Jordanian responsibility?

RANSOM: Some. It was occupied territory and so it was outside of the administrative control of the Jordanians, although they had a number of linkages which the Israelis tolerated. For example, the Jordanians had schoolteachers and certain banking officials there whom they paid. The Israelis allowed certain traffic to go back and forth across the bridge. So, there were connections there with the population that continued. I monitored all of that. But the West Bank was reported on by Jerusalem, not by Amman. So, information was there to be used, but the collection of it was not part of my direct responsibility.

Q: I was just wondering whether for political reasons we were watching what was happening there with the idea that eventually Jordan might regain sovereignty over this area.

RANSOM: I don't think that was an issue at the time. No. The issue seemed to me to be more about trying to keep the Jordanians out of combat and not have them engage with any Arab army or with the Israeli military.

Q: In 1973, after the October War, you went to the NSC?

RANSOM: I went to the NSC; that's right. That began a whole new sort of career for me.

Q: You were with the NSC from when to when?

RANSOM: 1973-1975. In this period Marjorie went back to work for USIA. Our home-life was being reoriented with a housekeeper being brought in to take care of our three girls and our house while Marjorie resumed her career as a USIA Foreign Service officer. That

took a lot of adjustments at home, but it was again a very rich and wonderful period in our lives. I found the work at the NSC to be challenging, informative, instructive beyond anything I had done before in my career.

I should mention that I stumbled across this assignment by myself and went over to the interview without the knowledge of the Office of Personnel. It was not a matter of being picked by the Department of State. The NSC staff that I talked to picked me and then they worked it out with State. There was a certain amount of freelancing. The Department was happy to see me find a place at the NSC. There weren't many Foreign Service officers there. The relations at the time were not good between the NSC and the Department. My transfer happened almost at the same time that Secretary Rogers resigned and Mr. Kissinger became the secretary of state. You will remember that for a brief period Kissinger was both the national security advisor as well as secretary of state. But the tensions between the NSC and the State Department were very deep and very strong. I think I was probably always seen by my colleagues in the Department as being part of the enemy camp even though I was a Foreign Service officer on detail to the NSC.

Q: Were you Mr. Arab-Israeli?

RANSOM: No. I actually went to work for an office that even in the NSC system was something of a wildcard. It was run by a wonderful man named Richard Kennedy, a retired U.S. Army colonel who had been in the finance branch. He was a man of extraordinary insight and swift judgment, canny political sense, but also a man with a domineering and a very forceful personality. I can't tell you how many times I bore the brunt of his anger. I must tell you that nobody shouted at me more in my Foreign Service career and nobody taught me more either. I had a very special affection for this man. He ran an office that had to do with intelligence budgeting and security assistance and the Washington Special Action Group, which was the crisis management group. Crisis management usually involved more than one department, or bureau or office. Kennedy had managed to insert himself as the coordinator of these different groups. So, at that junior rank, I found myself

sitting in on a lot of extraordinary crisis management meetings preparing memos that Kissinger used at those meetings with the secretaries of State and Defense and the head of the CIA. It was an insight into the way men relate to each other and how policies are made that was for me an extraordinary experience.

Q: I would have thought that you would have found the White House as an entity pretty much in a siege mentality this being the time of Watergate.

RANSOM: That's true. It became precisely that type of place. In the end, the NSC's goal was simply to maintain the status quo as Vietnam spiraled down towards a close and the Nixon administration became less and less able to control its own destiny.

Q: When you arrived there in 1973, Nixon was still the President.

RANSOM: Still the President and still very much in full flight. It was later when the Watergate scandal began to grow and spiral out of control. So, I was there through Nixon's resignation, a dramatic moment in my life again, and the coming of Gerald Ford. I had a very extraordinary insight into the way foreign policy was made at a very difficult time when foreign policy was increasingly in a secondary place on the presidential agenda.

Q: Were you finding during this Watergate period that things that should be done weren't being done because of the politics?

RANSOM: No, I think what I found was that there had to be an effort to limit what we did around the world because there was only so much energy and time for high level attention. With the exception of the last trip which Mr. Nixon took to the Middle East, I didn't see very much that was driven by the politics of resignation. The President and ScowcroftKissinger's successor as national security advisor- in particular seemed determined to conduct foreign policy as best they could in the national interest and to separate it from domestic issues. I took that away with me as a very large and important lesson.

Q: You said you dealt with security assistance. This means guns and things like that. What were some of the demands that you were having to deal with?

RANSOM: There was only so much money appropriated by Congress, which was providing less and less. So, cuts had to be made in the request for different countries and who got what was decided at the national security staff level. There were recommendations by Defense and by State which we would have to take into consideration as we developed budget proposals for the following fiscal year and then the President would have to make decisions. Our job was to write a memo to the President from Scowcroft which said that State recommended this, Defense recommended that, and we recommended this. Almost invariably, it was the third option that was checked. He would send the memo with a presidential letter for him to sign attached. That package was sent to Brent Scowcroft for his approval. There was always a certain mystery about whether the President actually sat down with his own pen to sign that letter or if he was generally briefed by Scowcroft who had put the Executive Decision Memorandum on an auto-sign machine. I think it was the latter. Nevertheless, the President appeared to exercise the final judgment. The staff of the NSC had to make some very difficult choices.

Q: How would you make a decision? State says this, Defense says this, and you cut it in two? You were really no more knowledgeable than anyone else.

RANSOM: State's recommendations did not come over with good arguments or even clear arguments. The bureaucratic process in State was such that things got muddier and muddier as memoranda like this went up the chain of command. Therefore, what had to be done at the end was to sort out what really appeared to be the most pressing presidential priorities. Frankly, that emerged from the circumstances rather more easily than it did from the State memorandum. There was a certain amount of lobbying that would go on both from State and Defense, but I must tell you that the memoranda that I wrote with

recommendations on how the appropriations request should be shaped almost invariably prevailed. State was not entirely happy about that. It just came with the territory, I thought.

Q: Did you find that Defense presented its side better than State?

RANSOM: Yes; by and large, that was true. They may have looked at the world a bit more simplistically than State, but they certainly argued it more clearly. They were always very willing simply to take care of friends whether they were friends with problems or friends with warts. State, in dealing with Korea, Turkey, Ethiopia, and other places like this, had to take account of the broad criticism of these regimes. So, that made their task more difficult, it seemed to me, than Defense's. I think officers in the State Department are inherently less convinced of the value of security and military assistance than Defense was and that made it easier for Defense to argue forcefully. State seemed to be inhibited. Also, the numbers of people who were involved in these decisions at the Defense Department was very small. ISA, a couple of services, JCS. In State, it was large bureaucracies contending with each other: Europe, Asia, Africa, Middle East, South Americathe regional bureaus. Then there was PM and the undersecretary for security assistance. They didn't contend very well. There was no clear-cut hierarchical principal. In Defense, the topmost general always won the argument. When you couldn't do this at State, what you got was compromised combinations and recommendations that led to very unclear conclusions. For all those reasons, I thought Defense came out looking and sounding better by and large - not necessarily right, but just more clear.

Q: You said Richard Kennedy's sub-unit of the NSC put together crisis management. The obvious one is the fall of South Vietnam. Were there any other particular ones that stick out in your mind before we come to Vietnam?

RANSOM: There always seemed to be something happening: the Middle East, Ethiopia, Korea. I was being stretched to the limit in preparing memos and trying to sort through what would be said and done in the meetings. By no means was I able to act completely

alone, but inevitably when we would have to help to write the memoranda that went to Kissinger before one of these meetings and when we prepared his talking points, I would sit behind him and take notes during the meetings. It was to my dismay and elation that I found that in these meetings he almost invariably used the talking points that we had provided. That was sobering.

The number of events and crises that make a claim on the attention of a President and on the White House is amazing in the American system. There has to be some winnowing out. That is very hard to do. However, the one that was of utmost importance was the decision to leave Vietnam. I will never forget the meeting. Bill Colby, the CIA director, showed up. This was after we had pulled the troops out and the attack in the north of the country began to force an evacuation of the South Vietnamese Army.

Q: We are talking very early 1974.

RANSOM: Yes. Colby came to the meeting in April. The meetings always started with an intelligence briefing. After that, the CIA representative was supposed to sit there and say nothing while a policy argument took place, unless he was asked for further comments on the intelligence that might bear on a decision - “Do you have leverage to do this? Can you get away with that? Who can help? Who can't?” Colby was determined to maintain the role of being someone who did not meddle in policy development or politics. Actually, he was up to his ears in the Vietnam war and subsequently said on many occasions that the Agency's covert program, Phoenix, had actually succeeded in defeating the guerrilla threat in South Vietnam; but the country, he claimed, was lost to a military invasion that was better funded and better led and more forcefully directed than the South's efforts

In any case, he came to the meeting on this day and he looked down the table. It was a very small room. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger was there. Kissinger was there. I don't remember who else was from State. Scowcroft was also there. Colby said, “It's over with, Henry. The Vietnamese army is being broken in the north. The country will

fall in six weeks." He said, "What do we do about it?" Colby said, "That's your problem. I'm just giving you the intelligence." Kissinger replied, "I'll come back to you later after the meeting." Colby said, "You won't get any more answers from me." George Brown was there from the JCS. Kissinger asked him and he said, "Bill is right. We're getting out, meaning that we're pulling out all of the Americans. We are in an evacuation mode." Kissinger said, "We can't be seen to cut and run." Schlesinger said, "It's too late for that." So, I was a fly on the wall for one of the most dramatic conversations of the U.S. government. Essentially, Kissinger made it appear that it was over his objections that all of these decisions were taken. But he had no choice in this matter. We were set to get out of Vietnam. The end of that was public knowledge. But it was a painful moment because it was clear that many of our friends were going to be captives of our enemies in a very few weeks. There was an effort to get equipment out and to get people out.

I remember one of the small sidelights of all of this. Ken Quinn, a Foreign Service officer who was working at the time in the Asia Office of the NSC, came to me to say that his Vietnamese wife was beseeching him to help her family get out. Ken went to Scowcroft and asked for help. Scowcroft, in his worldly-wise manner, made a telephone call and the entire family of 14 or 16 people were evacuated to an American aircraft carrier. Brent did such things, busy though he was, he did and did well. He couldn't help everybody. But he was right in trying to help a few. Ken's wife's entire family arrived in Washington with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. Ken had a small car. He took the whole family to his house on a bus. He had a townhouse in Old Town, Alexandria. Somehow he moved them all in. I went by the house with other friends from the NSC to deliver clothing and blankets. No one was home at the time. I don't know where they had gone. But we left the donations across the street where there were two couples sitting outside their houses at the time. One was a young and trendy couple who was horrified that all these Vietnamese were moving in to such a small house right across the street. What would it mean for parking, property values, and such? The other couple was a retired American government employee and his wife. Their response was, "Oh, we have to help. You leave

that stuff with us. We'll get more from the neighbors. Don't worry. We'll take care of it." Those disparate responses really struck me. I thought it was so illustrative of the split in American generations in their view of the Vietnam War.

Anyway, it was a painful time. It certainly marked my feelings in a profound way. I had always been a student of Munich and I feared greatly what the consequences would be of our exodus from Vietnam. They were great. The Soviets went on the offensive around the world —South America, the Middle East, Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan. We spent years playing catch-up ball. But play we did.

Q: Was there a feeling at the time - I've gotten this from some other people I've talked to, but I'd like your comment on this - that Henry Kissinger was looking at Vietnam concerned that really the Soviets might prevail and that what we were trying to do was to build up bulwarks and try to stop what possibly could be the inevitable and that is the dominance of the Soviet Union. Was there at all that feeling there?

RANSOM: Kissinger was not a man who was easy to love or understand. I thought at the time he was really too clever by half and that the man who was really in charge of American foreign policy was Richard Nixon. I continued to think that even in the aftermath of the books that have been written on this.

Kissinger was, frankly, duplicitous in his dealings with everyone. But the outline of his thinking was very clear and probably sound. It was to use the triangular relationship between Soviet Union, China, and ourselves as best we could to limit the harm that either could do to us without making it too evident that we were trying to set them at each other's throats. It was also to limit our involvement in expensive or difficult conflicts around the world so that we could spend our limited credit effectively where we could. These are conservative approaches to foreign policy and very sensible ones. I certainly think that's the way to do it. It was an amoral approach, one that focused on power relationships more than on what was good and right in the world. I again think that is the way to do it. But

having said all of that, I go back to my original statement. I think he was a man who was hard to love and hard to understand. I never had a close relationship with Henry Kissinger. I was in the room repeatedly at meetings like the ones I described earlier. I prepared memoranda to him and for his signature. I became close to Scowcroft. But Kissinger was in an orbit of his own and didn't notice new members of the NSC staff after he left that staff. It was an arm's length relationship that I had.

Q: How about Brent Scowcroft? What was your impression of how he operated? How was his effectiveness?

RANSOM: I think he's a magnificent American—judicious, thoughtful, tough, unromantic, eminently sensible, a naturally good and humorous man who felt that being good and humorous in that job was inappropriate. He was scrupulously fair. I felt extraordinarily comfortable with him; I liked him very, very, very much.

Q: Did you notice any change in how the NSC operated when Kissinger moved over to be secretary of state and particularly at the time of Nixon's resignation?

RANSOM: Kissinger was the dominating figure. Even after he was forced to give up the job of national security advisor belatedly after becoming secretary of state, Scowcroft felt that it was his duty to serve the president and Henry Kissinger. Scowcroft was extraordinarily careful in these relationships. But the dominating figure was Henry Kissinger throughout that whole period. He increasingly was engaged by Nixon, who was reaching out for lifelines and Henry Kissinger appeared to be one of them. It was a disconcerting time for people like me because it became increasingly clear to me that Nixon not only was going to be impeached but should be impeached. The shoddiness of the whole affair was appalling. We in the NSC simply gritted our teeth and did what we could as noble Romans to maintain that phalanx from being broken. But in my view there was a very serious conflict of interest. I can remember the day Nixon finally resigned as being a day of tremendous relief for me—that the long nightmare was finally over.

Q: Were you called into that famous meeting where he spoke to the staff?

RANSOM: Yes. My job kept me almost exclusively in the Executive Office Building. I went over to the West Wing only for certain meetings. I almost never went to the East Wing. But that day, the White House was just open. All kinds of people were going in and coming out, almost without restraint.

I went over and walked through the White House. I went over to the West Wing where there was a big gathering of Nixon loyalists waiting in front of the open podium. There were women weeping and then looking somber. As I was standing at the doorway, I could see Nixon when he came out of the White House elevator at the end of the hall and started down the hallway. His military aide, a very loyal Marine colonel, who later went with him to be part of his post-presidential staff, walked up to him and put both hands on Nixon's chest. Nixon was almost in a trance. He stopped robot-like. The colonel was trying to tell him who was in the room and what the setting was. Nixon waited and then this man's hands dropped and he stepped back and aside and Nixon began moving forward into that brightly lit room. There was a hush as he went up to the podium. People cheered and tried to cheer and applaud. He gave a speech that I could only describe as pathetic.

Q: Quoting from Teddy Roosevelt.

RANSOM: The wonder of it all was that he was able to find the resources to give a speech of any sort. He was overwhelmed by failure of defeat. But he obviously was determined not to show it. While the speech may have seemed to be pathetic and disjointed, I, standing there watching it, found it an extraordinary demonstration of just how goddamned tough this guy was. I felt relief about his resignation, but I also felt a deep running admiration for a man who faced adversity so courageously. Sometimes, when you are a soldier, the enemy might overrun you; you then have a choice between surrender and fighting. My heart has always gone out to the men who keep on fighting. Nixon was one of those.

Anyway, there was a very interesting sequel to that moment. It was on a foggy August morning around 10:00 or 10:30, maybe 11:00. I wanted to watch Nixon fly away from the South Lawn. So, I walked out of the East Wing, turned left, and went through to the balcony. Nixon exited from a door at a level below where I was standing, walked down a carpet onto the green lawn, and there was the helicopter. I was standing on the balcony with only two other persons: James Schlesinger and the White House cook. The cook was dressed in a chef's white uniform. We all stood there impassively watching this. At the end, Nixon flashed his double armed signal of departure with two fingers raised in a “V” sign and then he turned and entered the helicopter. It began cranking up very slowly. Finally, there was a deafening sound. The chopper lifted off, pivoted, and disappeared into the gloom of the morning. It was almost a haunted scene. As the helicopter faded from view in the fog over the tidal basin, the three of us stood there and looked at each other. Schlesinger took his pipe out of his mouth, where he had clenched it in his teeth, and he banged it on the metal railing of the balcony, emptying out the bowl, and he said, “It's an interesting constitutional question, but I think I am still the secretary of defense. So, I am going back to my office. “He looked at the cook and said, 'What are you going to do?'" The cook said, “I'm going to prepare lunch for the president.” I thought, “Of course. The king is dead. Long live the king!” The cook had it right. This wasn't a matter of abstruse argument over constitutional privileges. Our state was going to carry on and the president would want lunch in about an hour and a half. So, the cook went off and prepared it. I've always thought of that as something very important about our country. We may stumble but we don't fall.

Q: Did you feel that when Ford came that at least as far as national security problems Kissinger was even more in control than before?

RANSOM: I think Ford had such limited credit with the Congress and with the American people, particularly after he pardoned Nixon, that Kissinger's power was also constrained. As I suggested earlier, I always have felt that Henry Kissinger was the implementer of

Nixon's strategy. Nixon was the one who made the hard and the brilliant decisions. Ford lacked the conceptual qualities needed by a president. He was a legislator by experience. He was not unintelligent. He was certainly a good man. But he was a novice in foreign policy compared to Richard Nixon. That also constrained Kissinger. I think in many ways Kissinger and Ford collaborated in the Sinai withdrawals and things like that. I remember hearing Ford saying one day, “You know, when you're in power, you do what you can do. I never really looked beyond that.” He was very proud of the disengagement agreements in the Sinai. But they were holding actions and limited ones. In many ways, Kissinger's term ended with Nixon's resignation.

Q: Was there a feeling of deflation in the NSC when Nixon left?

RANSOM: A lot of the men on the NSC were Nixon appointees; so people were very guarded in what they said, but I think that everyone shared the feeling of relief for the president and for the country and that we would be breaking out of this long national nightmare. The question became how we could serve the new president and get him started.

Q: How was the pardoning of Nixon by Ford received by you and by the NSC ?

RANSOM: In retrospect, I think that that was what got Carter elected. It was a step that Ford took in what he thought was in the best interest of the country. But there was a smell about it which simply never went away. Ford was an unelected president. He was elected by the House of Representatives. He was seen as someone who was a poor substitute for what had gone before. He had very few friends of his own on the White House staff. He hadn't appointed anyone on the presidential staff. He just moved in and tried to work with Nixon's crew. Of course, the domestic agenda in particular was ravaged by Watergate. Ford essentially kept the Nixon crew until the end of his term.

Q: You left the NSC in 1975. So, you weren't there at the very end of the Ford regime. Where did you go in 1975?

RANSOM: As I said, Marjorie had gone back to work for USIS and so I faced the challenge of finding some post where we could both serve. The formula I came up with was to request the Department send me as DCM while she requested the Agency to send her as PAO. This was the first time this had been done and there were legal and policy issues that had to be overcome in both State and USIA. But we finally found a post and an ambassador who would accept us. It had never happened before in the Foreign Service. That post was Yemen; the ambassador was a good friend of ours named Tom Scotes.

I was prepared to leave the NSC for a posting in Sanaa as DCM. I think a lot of people on the NSC staff thought it was ridiculous for me to go from such a mighty, lofty post to such an obscure one. But I can tell you that, in terms of my own life, working as part of a tandem couple, proved to be an enormously enriching experience. It was wonderful for our daughters. We had a lot of fun in Yemen. I have always been most satisfied with the decision.

Q: You were in Yemen from when to when?

RANSOM: 1975-1978.

Q: When you got to Yemen here in 1975, what was Sanaa and Yemen like?

RANSOM: Yemen was a country between two states that could not have been more antithetical: the very conservative Saudi kingdom to the north and the very radical Arab communist state of Aden to the south. There was never any question that our major interest in the area coincided with the Saudis', but we wanted them to engage rather than to confront the Yemen Arab Republic. We always had the idea that, in some way, the

Yemen Arab Republic could be used against the very radical communist state in Adenthe People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. PDRY it was called.

The Soviets had the exact opposite policy. They wanted to see if the Yemen Arab Republic could not be tied more closely to their radical friends in the PDRY. They wanted to see if, by one way or another, their dealings in the Yemens could not be turned into some sort of a relationship with the Saudis - maybe a relationship of leverage, maybe a relationship of engagement. So, they were pumping a lot of money into the YAR, much more than we, particularly for military aid. We were in many ways the misers in Yemen. It didn't bother me in the least.

We had very good friends in the government. We liked Yemen. We traveled around a lot. We found the country very interesting as well as sufficiently important. Marjorie and I - she in USIA and I in State - had a wonderful time. I had never been a DCM before. It took me back to the days in the Marine Corps when I had been a platoon commander in charge of a lot of men and with certain responsibilities. I found that the whole method of dealing with others from a position of command in the Foreign Service had to be very different than that of the Marine Corps, but some things carried over. Our girls were coming into school age. They were very lively and full of fun. We devoted each Friday to the family, going out on picnics in the magnificent mountains around the city of Sanaa. We had lots of friends, both Yemenis and Americans, and it was a very good time in our lives.

We probably were guilty of exaggerating for the Department the importance of Yemen and the role that it had in the geopolitics of that part of the world. But that is an occupational hazard in the Foreign Service. It happens all the time; we tried to curb it and be reasonable about it and even humorous, but I suppose at times it crept in. What we argued for consistently and firmly was that the Saudis should engage the Yemenis with aid, border settlements, labor agreements, and more amiable discussions of diplomatic relations. By and large, that process in both Riyadh and Yemen was more or less successful. The Yemenis and the Saudis are never going to love each other. They are really two different

peoples. One settled on the mountains. The others have their origins in the desert and nomadic life. One doesn't expect to see them really be good friends. Also one was a republican and the other a monarchy, left and right, and that added complications. But we did our best to figure out the politics of the situation and helped to stabilize the government and watched institutions develop.

We had a very large AID mission which was engaged in development efforts. That was fun. We had a small military mission which did a little bit of training and a little bit of arms supply— nothing like what the Soviets did. Nevertheless, we kept our hand in. We had a very successful program of teaching English and providing scholarships that was run by Marjorie.

Q: What was your impression of Saudi diplomacy? I assume they had a mission there. How did you find they operated?

RANSOM: The Saudis had given up their war in the Republic of Yemen and established diplomatic relations, but they still were not about to abandon their allies, particularly the northern tribes. They wanted very much to see them continue to be a kind of buffer against Yemeni threats. So, they funneled money to politicians and to tribes in the north. We made the argument that funds should be funneled to the government which would get them more for their money. Eventually, that materialized. But the Saudis were extremely suspicious of the Yemenis and frankly didn't like them. Yemenis came by the hundreds of thousands to work in Saudi Arabia. They had, in fact, a privileged status. They were the only people who could come to the kingdom without a work permit or a visa. They just came. They had to register, but it was easy for them not just to work but also to set up shops and booths—limited commercial transactions. These immigrants sent hundreds of millions of dollars back home in remittances. It was a mainstay of the Yemeni economy, but it led the Saudis to see Yemenis solely as workers and a kind of underclass. There wasn't very much respect or admiration on the Saudi side for Yemen. The great Saudi fear was that the north of Yemen would join with the south of Yemen either through a coup

d'etat or invasion or even willing acquiescence and then Saudi Arabia would be faced with a very large threat from a Soviet armed and backed state with a large population pressing against the southern part of the kingdom. It was that that Saudi Arabia was determined to prevent. Of course, so were we. The question was always what was going on in south Yemen? What were the attitudes in the north towards the south? This was hard to find out. We had no embassy in South Yemen and no way to go there. It was very difficult to see people. The Soviets sure as hell didn't tell us much. The Saudis were the victims of a lot of fabricated stories that alarmed them but did not really help them make policy very clearly or consistently.

So, the south was divided against itself. There were coups d'etat, battles, and occasionally talks between the north and the south which made the Saudis very, very anxious and reticent. The Saudis wanted to work to overthrow the southern government. These efforts were always a failure. So, Saudi Arabia teetered awkwardly back and forth between different policy goals.

Q: What were we getting about developments in the south? In some places in the old days, we used to get pretty good information about China through the Yugoslav embassy. Were there any sources of that type or our intelligence sources?

RANSOM: Yes. I worked very hard to develop sources who knew the south from traveling there or who had families or business connections there. The government itself provided us with some information. But it was hard work and I'm not sure we did a lot. I developed a series of cables called “Pidry at the Crossroads,” which charted as best I could, the growing tensions between different groups in the south.

Eventually, there was quite an extraordinary culmination to all of that. It happened while we were there. Guerrillas in the north were in touch with one of the factions in the south. While this made the Saudis nervous, we thought this would divide the south and weaken its large military forces. These contacts eventually led to a very serious fight in the south

between different army factions. The north intervened in a way that lent moral support to one side. For that, in cloudy circumstances in which the Saudis may have had a hand, one faction of north Yemenis killed the president of North Yemen, Ibrahim Dahamdi. He was assassinated, killed, murdered, and then a story was put out to cover up the crime. It was pretty transparent. But in the tense time, we moved to support the new government of the north only to find a few months later that they had started to do the same thing with the south and this time it was the south that sent someone to north Yemen, to Sanaa, to kill the president. He succeeded in his attempt in the headquarters where the president was sitting. So, yet a third president came to power — someone whom I had gotten to know very briefly. It was a time of teetering — on the verge of collapse — of the political system in the north, along with a major threat from the south. These were eventful days - coups d'etat, murders, intrigues, conspiracies, and a little bit of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

Q: Did the south have the preponderance of military might or would the outcome be in doubt if they went to war with each other?

RANSOM: Both the south and the north had Soviet military assistance and some U.S. military assistance, mostly paid for by the Saudis. But we believed that the most effective forces were in the south. Certainly the greatest number of tanks, airplanes, missiles, artillery, and such were there. The southern forces fought each other rather consistently but one couldn't dismiss the possibility that they would not be used against the north.

In fact, a year after I left, there was a kind of an invasion of the north by the south. I rushed back to Sanaa from my new post in DOD to help out with military assistance for the north and to provide moral support. The actions we took did help restore a balance in that part of the world and to calm the situation. This was a time when the contest between the Soviet Union and the United States always seemed to me to be very clear. It wasn't always in the forefront of politics, but it was there at the center of our concern. In addition to that, there was a large concern about Saudi Arabia and the hope to foster development and better relations between the disputing states in the Middle East.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

RANSOM: His name was Tom Scotes. He was a wonderful man and a wonderful friend. He took on the responsibility for accepting both Marjorie and myself. There was a State Department policy barred a DCM from having a spouse working at an embassy. Since we had no wives who were posted as or being considered for DCM anywhere in the world at that time, the person out of luck was always the wife.

Q: These were the early days.

RANSOM: This was 1975. So, we had to get the policy changed in order for both of us to go. The director general thought it was a very bad idea. He said, “It's not good for your marriage, David. It's not good for other people in the post and it's not good for the Foreign Service.” I said, “My marriage is very strong and we will be the best judges of whether or not it is affected by this. It is very good for the Foreign Service since it gives you a lot of alternatives. You have to deal with the ambassador, who wants this. If he can handle it, why is it a concern to anyone else?” The bureau was noble in its support. They looked at both the assignees and said they were good people, who were right for their jobs. They backed us up wonderfully.

In the end, it came down to a lawyer. I went to see him. His name was Mollenberg. He looked at me and said, “You realize this is illegal.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Because you write your wife's efficiency report and that's a violation of the Federal Anti-Nepotism Law.” I said, “I wouldn't write my wife's efficiency report for all the tea in China. I will never touch it. I will have nothing to do with signing vouchers for her travel expenses or anything else. There is no way that anybody is every going to get me on the Anti-Nepotism act.” He said, “Well, if you're not going to write the efficiency report, who is?” I said, “The ambassador is and USIA have agreed to send out one person once a year to do a second report.” He said, “Well, then it's not illegal” and that was basically the end of the argument. We both went. We set a precedent in doing that. For tandem couples, a lot of other barriers then fell

when you had this relationship - PAO-DCM - in place. Nobody could object to the many other combinations that would be considered thereafter. So, we made a small contribution of our own to the social change and transformation of our beloved Foreign Service.

Q: What were the Soviets doing

RANSOM: The Yemenis wanted to maintain an independent position and not get sucked entirely into either camp. Each camp gave the Yemenis something that was very important to them. We had a voice with the Saudis. The Soviets had military assistance. So, they wanted to maintain their independence and their leverage as best they could. The Soviets had a tough hand to play. Everybody knew that their favorite partners were in the south, not in the north. But they did their best. They set up a small coalition of radical states on the Horn with Somalia, South Yemen, and then eventually, after Haile Selassie fell, Ethiopia...

Q: Was this about the time that he fell?

RANSOM: Yes. It happened when I was there. The Soviets were overjoyed. The collapse of the Shah on one hand and Haile Selassie on the other seemed to them to be a harbinger of great things to come for them. It looked to many people like the end of our friends. These upheavals posed large risks to our position in the area. Regional powers were important to us as a way of extending our power in the area. Haile Selassie and the Shah were good friends. However, the Soviet efforts at coalition diplomacy in that part of the world basically came to naught even though they enlisted no less a person than Fidel Castro to travel in the area to try to put the deal together. They wanted to include the north Yemenis in that coalition, but the Yemenis managed to avoid the embrace as we offered blandishments of our own for a closer relationship with us and the Saudis. They were clever people and they had their own idea of what was good for them.

Q: I think the thing that is interesting is that in all of the Middle East the south Yemenis seem to be the only ones who really almost embrace the Soviets. Almost everyone else

says, “Yes, the Soviets were helpful, but they weren't really our cup of tea.” The Arabs' policies were a homegrown thing and they accepted the Soviets as handy suppliers of equipment and support, but basically they were going to do their own thing. Somehow, I've always had the feeling the south Yemenis were more in the Soviet camp than anyone else.

RANSOM: That's absolutely true. They were virtually a communist state and were run by a party which had a uneasy relationship with the military. It was hard to explain why. One reason was that they saw the game working against them. The Saudis were frightening and intimidating. We were not friendly. They were very anti-imperialist and anti-colonialism. They believed that the Arab nationalist movements that had come to power in the aftermath of the British departure were the more radical,—not the more bourgeois. But there were other explanations. South Yemen is even more divided in terms of tribes and region than the north. Communism was a kind of lowest common denominator that offered no advantage to anyone else and seemed to draw everybody together. That view was nonsense and it constantly broke down. There were no new men in the socialist mold that were being created in south Yemen despite the schooling, enthusiasm, and drum-beating. But it may have played a certain role in helping the radical ethos to maintain itself. But it also drove the economy into the ground. The port simply ceased to function. There were no exports. Everything was nationalized. Agriculture sank. Remittances went down to almost nothing because south Yemenis were not allowed to enter Saudi Arabia or the Gulf. It was the only Arab state where population dwindled and gross national product simply declined year after year.

Q: What about Muscat, Oman? What do we call it now?

RANSOM: Sultanate of Oman.

Q: At one point, it was Muscat, Oman. Was that a bulwark against this?

RANSOM: Yes, we thought so. On one hand, the south was helping an insurrection in the western-most province of Oman, a province called Zufar. That “freedom fighter” movement

was something that the British, we, and others felt had to be stopped. Eventually, it was. They never did anything quite similar in either Saudi Arabia or in north Yemen, but that was one of the things that we were concerned about.

Q: Were the British a player in this? I know they used to run certain states in the area..

RANSOM: The British were the dominant player in this. We had a very small role in the matter.

Q: How about in the British representation in north Yemen?

RANSOM: It was there, but it was very modest.

Q: How did you, your ambassador, and the rest of the embassy operate with the government? You had two assassinations in this period. How did we react at that time? What were we concerned about?

RANSOM: Those are two different questions. Marjorie and I are both Arabists and so we had an awful lot of contact with Yemenis and a lot of dealings with them. Yemenis at that point were able and willing to accept invitations and so we saw them a lot in our house. It was a place where there were no movies and no VCRs. Marjorie as a USIA officer got both movies and the first VCR in the country. So, entertaining at our house was a piece of cake. We would show a Marx Brothers movie or something like that and anybody you invited on the guest list would come. Everyone would come. Good meal, good movie, lots of interesting people.

Marjorie's friends were the “softer” side of the society - the journalists, the educators, the few artists that existed, people educated in the West. Mine tended to be diplomats and businessmen - not so many officers (They wouldn't come.), but ministers and politicians. These two groups which would not meet anyplace else would meet around our table or in our living room. We would set it up for a movie like “The Russians are Coming,” which they

thought was ridiculous, or “A Night at the Opera,” which they thought was even funnier. The Yemenis have a magnificent sense of humor and they are very quick and intuitive people. They never missed a point in a movie no matter how culturally biased it might have been. When we showed the movie “Casablanca,” but one that is rooted in World War II and which included certain stereotypes of Americans, Germans, French, and Italians, I wondered whether or not Yemenis would get it. They didn't miss a trick. They laughed at the Italian. They loved the American. They hated the German. The Frenchman with his worldly cynicism was someone who came across as being someone to admire but with whom a good Yemeni had to be very careful.

So, they gained that way a kind of picture of America. These classic films gave a picture of America which was altogether sort of engaging and interesting. Those movie nights provided us with a lot of treasured memories and a tremendous amount of laughing. I don't remember being at a post where so many outrageously funny things happened. People spent a lot of time laughing, drinking, going to dinner parties. There were exciting stories. It was a very intense Middle Eastern experience.

Q: They were quite different than the Saudis. My impression of the Saudis was that they were pretty solemn people.

RANSOM: The Saudis are much more aloof and reserved and they certainly don't laugh as much. I think it's probably fair to say they're very, very good friends but they're not as much fun.

Q: Did you have any feeling that there was a certain amount of rapport between the mountaineers of north Yemen and, say, Appalachia, Kentucky, and all that?

RANSOM: The tribalism in Yemen and the splits along religious lines were very deep and fundamental to the society. You have to remember that Yemen was a society that was almost completely walled off from the world until shortly after we established a mission in the country. So, it was laughingly described as a 14th century country rushing into the

15th century. That was a bit harsh, but it was only beginning to develop roads, electric lines and telephones. There was no TV station when we got there. There was a radio station, but they very limited contact with the outside world. The government really wasn't able to keep up with the demands for change. What we saw and were very impressed by was the Yemeni people, who were very hardworking, who pitched in and who, with remittance money that did not come from the government, began to engendered economic development projects on their own - water projects, chicken projects, road projects, electrification of villages with generators. They bought cars and trucks. They were the ones who were moving ahead. The government was laboring to keep up.

It was a unique development situation. We tried to pitch our assistance efforts not to support big infrastructure projects, but to improvements that would leverage off the energy and imagination of the people. We supported small scale projects and worked with the Yemeni villages with water, grains, etc. I think we had the right idea, although the Yemeni government complained because we had no big, expensive capital project in Yemen. We just said, “Go ahead, complain. We won't do it.”

Q: How about exchange programs? There was a sizable Yemeni community in New York, Ohio, and New Jersey, too.

RANSOM: There certainly was.

Q: Did they play a role? Were we sending Yemenis to study at American universities?

RANSOM: Marjorie was sending Yemenis to study at universities. Actually, we didn't send Yemenis to universities. We sent most of our few students to graduate school. By then, they had proven themselves in universities and we knew that they were good science students. They were stable people. But I must tell you that all the while I was there I worried about this policy above all because we sent very few people - at the most 11 or 13 a year - while the Soviets were sending 200 a year to the Soviet Union universities. I wondered how we could ever keep up with this tidal wave of people when they returned,

perhaps indoctrinated, or at least inclined to support the Soviet Union against our friends of Yemen. I guess I needn't have worried. Last year, Marjorie was invited back to Yemen by the embassy to help to start a Fulbright commission. There was a banquet where she was the guest speaker. There were 95 graduates from the United States there. It read as “who's who” of Yemeni society — ministers, businessmen, educators, journalists — many others, women as well as men. They were enormously proud of their education and prosperous and purposeful. I sat at the head table with a former prime minister who also was a graduate from the American education system. I asked him about these hundreds and even thousands of young Yemenis who had been educated in the Soviet Union - where were they? He said,:” I can't think of any who had made an impact in society.” He went on: “You have to understand, David, we have nothing against them. We put no barriers in their way. The Soviet Union no longer exists and we don't care about their political views. It's just that they didn't get a good education and they didn't come back with much to offer.”

Q: Often, that happens and also there is a certain inoculation by going there of people coming back. I dealt with Africans coming out of Bulgaria who were getting the same type of thing in the 1960's. The Soviet system didn't work very well. It really had very little to offer.

RANSOM: I think there are two things. One is that these students came back without being very impressed with the Soviet Union. They hadn't been very happy there. The other thing was that they just weren't very well trained.

Q: I've talked to an Ethiopian who got a very good course in Marxist economics that was absolutely valueless when he went back to work under Haile Selassie. How were your relations with our embassy in Jeddah at that time?

RANSOM: There was a certain amount of cordial difference over what we should be doing with Yemen. By and large, it is fair to say that the Department sided with the embassy in

Jeddah. But we all knew each other very well. It wasn't a time when, like now, you can pick up the phone and call. You couldn't just call out of Yemen. It was very difficult. Anyway, there were no secure lines. There was no e-mail. Travel was very difficult. But I managed to go up to Jeddah and talk to people. I became actually quite good friends with a political appointee, the former governor of South Carolina, John West, who was ambassador to Saudi Arabia He was a man I instantly liked and talked to. We invited him to Yemen to visit us with his wife. He had been dean of the law school at the University of South Carolina; he was an extraordinarily intelligent and thoughtful man and game for almost anything. He would take me around with him when he went to visit Saudis, ranking officials, and we'd always have a discussion of Yemen. So, there was a very, very close and cordial connection there with the embassy in Jeddah under a man who was a political appointee, but a very important one and a very good one.

Q: What did our embassy do when there were these two assassinations? How did we react?

RANSOM: The first assassination was an inside job— the North Yemenis against the others. We had a hard time at first piecing it together. The cover story was clearly incredible. The cover story was a story in itself. There had been a competition for the installation of a telephone system which the Yemeni government was going pay for with World Bank money. There was an American competitor, GTE, and a French company. We couldn't get nearly as much public attention from the Yemeni government as the French could. In fact, the French invited the president of Yemen, Ibrahim al-Hamdi, who was later assassinated, to Paris on a state visit and he was received at the airport by Giscard d'Estaing— the Giscard d'Estaing who was the cousin of the prime minister and the president of Cobble de Lyon, which made the telephone wires which would have gone to Yemen. Then there were state banquets hosted by the two Giscards and a lot of tours of Paris arranged by the two. Al-Hamdi got the royal treatment and that made a huge difference. I went to see the prime minister who was going to go accompany al-Hamdi. From a previous trip to Paris, I had some telephone slugs left over. I gave the slugs to

the prime minister and said, “Look, these are supposed to work in any French public telephone. You get out of the car on the Champs Elys#es and go up to any telephone and try to put one in and call your embassy. Here is the telephone number of your embassy. If it works, buy the French phones. If it doesn't work, come back and buy the American phones. I'll tell you one thing. Ours will work.”

Well, the Yemenis went to Paris. The prime minister used the slugs. They didn't work, but they still bought French. The president came back and on the plane with him were two French nightclub hostesses. They were very high class call girls. They established themselves in a house. Sanaa is a small place and you hear about such things very quickly. Apparently, they were part of the telephone deal. That made me very upset, but there wasn't much that we could do. I actually ran into these women one day when I was going down to the local PTT office; they came in to send some sort of telegram or make a telephone call. They were fairly snappy looking ladies, but of a certain demi-mondaine quality, as you would expect from servicing the Yemen government en masse in the evenings. But I spoke to them in my best French and they greeted me. The bodyguards really closed in quickly to fend off somebody like me. Anyway, the night that Hamdi was killed, his body was taken over to their house. The women were shot and undressed. The president's brother was brought in and shot. They were all strewn on the bed. Videotapes were made. The story was put out that fundamentalists in the north from the tribes had learned about these illicit relationships and found them in the middle of a compromising situation.

This story was obviously not true, but from the outcome, it wasn't clear exactly how this had been engineered or who had done it. We knew who the new president was, but it was hard to believe that this was a brutal political assassination in which our Saudi friends had been involved. I didn't think they did it.

Anyway, piecing that story together took a while during a very tense time. We were much better informed than other embassies and particularly the French embassy. I finally went

over to the French embassy two or three days later. I had the story by then. I got to the DCM in the French embassy. I said, “Look, you may think that this is a commercial matter, but I am trying to present this to you as a consular matter. There are two dead French women in this town. You should know how this happened.” I told him. Of course, he thought it was an attempt on our part to embarrass the government of France and tilt the balance against them in the telephone contract. But it was not. The telephone system was installed with French equipment and it sure as hell didn't work very well.

Q: Was there any hesitancy on our part in accepting a new government?

RANSOM: Not much. We knew the people. We certainly deplored the murder of someone who was a good friend of ours and of a man that we had admired. But as is normal in situations like this, we consulted with the Saudis. They wanted very much to move on and deal with the new government and that is what we did.

Q: I'm not quite clear as to who was behind this thing?

RANSOM: It was a gang of army officers who were worried that Hamdi was dealing with the south. They were able to tell the Saudis: “This is a danger to you as well as to us and we have to move against them. We want to be sure that we have your acquiescence, if not your support.” The story that it was a Saudi initiative is not one that I credit. But almost certainly they had some foreknowledge of it.

Q: What about the second assassination?

RANSOM: The man who was then installed as president of Yemen was an army officer by the name of Ibrahim al-Gashi— a tribal figure, a nice enough guy. He was almost immediately importuned by a faction in the south that wanted north Yemeni support for its activities. Al-Gashi carried out these talks with Saudi blessing and knowledge. The faction in the south that felt it was being conspired against sent somebody to see him along with a message in a briefcase. The messenger walked into his office, opened the briefcase,

and the bomb blew up. It killed the messenger and the president of Yemen, Ibrahim al-Gashi. So, in short order, there was the need to install another new president. This time, the Saudis were very worried. I was there by myself at the time. The Saudis came into town and a very able, wonderful man named Ali Osama showed up as a sort of a super-emissary. We talked about who might be able to restore control, win support, and carry on. We agreed on a name. I remember even suggesting the name. It turned out that that man did become president and he is, in fact, still the president: Ali Abdullah Saleh. So, we chose better than we had anticipated.

Q: How did this work out? Was this somebody you knew? What was the role of everybody in this?

RANSOM: The society seemed paralyzed. It was clear that the army was going to make the decision. Yemen is a small place. One knew most of the officers. You knew them by reputation and by history even if you didn't know them well personally. Some were strong and purposeful leaders and some were loyal followers. There were only two or three people that I thought could step into the void. How long they would last, I didn't know. But Ali Abdullah Salah, I thought, was one who should be considered. That was a guess that turned out to be right. I was in no way a king-maker. The discussions with the Saudis served, I think, to confirm thoughts and ideas they had been hearing from other people and which they had themselves. But we did work very, very closely with the Saudis in this period. As it turned out, as I said, Ali Abdullah Saleh did become the president of Yemen and he still is. He is a friend of mine.

Q: What about the role of Islam in Yemen during this 1975-1978 period?

RANSOM: Yemenis belonged to two strains of Islam. There were the Sunnis in the south — that is the southern part of the Yemen Arab Republic and north Yemen. Sunnis are the Islam of a non-tribalized society — farmers for the most part.

The other Islamic strain is Zaydi-Shia, which is the Islam of the northern tribes that had always dominated society in Yemen and had supplied imams, leaders, poets, and other cultural leadership. They distinguished themselves in a way so many national religions do in the Middle East, but they are not mainstream Shia. They accept the first four caliphs and that's that. But it was a badge of their domination of society and of the country and had great strength in that sense. They were already so conservative that fundamentalism had not emerged as an issue. Fundamentalism is a quasi-political movement that clothes the politics of a certain group of men in the guise of religion. It cannot thrive unless there is sufficient cultural change in society so that they can claim that western and other influences are undermining Islam. It requires the introduction of a great deal of new law in areas where Islam was always mute - nationality law, commerce law, etc. None of those conditions existed in Yemen in the mid-1970's. Therefore, there was no fundamentalist movement. There is now and that is worrisome.

Q: You were there when the Carter administration came in. In a 14th century country moving into the 15th century, were you reminded by Washington of the human rights thrust of Carter or were you off the screen?

RANSOM: Off the screen. It wasn't an issue in our dealings with the Yemeni government. Jimmy Carter appointed John West to Saudi Arabia as our ambassador. John West had been the first governor (in fact, for a long time the only governor) to espouse Jimmy Carter as a presidential candidate. He was offered the ambassadorial position and accepted it to serve Carter. I say he did so with distinction. The Saudis still remember him with enormous fondness. But even under these circumstances, we didn't put much emphasis on human rights. Carter did influence our position in other areas. Jimmy Carter was very cautious in the post-Vietnam period about getting the U.S. involved in any way with foreign friends who didn't meet our litmus test for democracy and stability and such. So, the Saudis were never his close friends. But West went a long way to offset that.

Q: How about Israel? Did Israel play any role?

RANSOM: No. Israel didn't play a role. There was almost no discussion in Yemen of Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict. There was no doubt about whose side they were on, but it wasn't one of the issues. They had a small Jewish population of their own, maybe 1,000 people. We sort of occasionally looked in on them. As it turned out, years later when I was in charge of the Arabian Peninsula, I was able to work with a very wonderful professor from Yeshiva University, Hirman Tyreel, to extricate the last remnant of the Jewish community from Yemen. There are now only a few left. They go in and out freely. They are basically merchants. They even are traveling to Israel to see their families and this is winked at by the Yemeni government.

Once I took a trip at one point from Chigda overland to Sanaa with Tom Pickering. You have to remember that there were really no roads in Yemen at the time; so we were driving through mountain vastness and up wadis and across sandy stretches without knowing really exactly where we were. In every village we would enter, we would ask where the next village or town was. We would go on from there, camping at night, carrying our own water. It was just a wonderful Middle Eastern escapade with Tom Pickering, who was a great explorer. He asked if I would like to come because he wanted somebody who knew the way. He asked me whether I knew the way? I wrote back and said, “Absolutely. I know the way very well. I know the way as well as anybody.” When we were a day out, he said, “Do you really know the way?” I said, “Of course not, but I know the way as well as anybody.” But we got to Sanaa safe and sound.

At one of the villages we visited, a man came running up to me. He looked just like all the other Yemenis. He put his hands out and said, “Kutum. Kutum,” which means “books.” I was befuddled. This is not an expression of greeting or a welcome or anything else. What the hell was he talking about? He invited us into his house for a cup of coffee. When we got in, it became clear to me that he was a Yemeni Jew and what he wanted was indeed Kutum - books. He thought we were bringing him the Torah. When I got back to Sanaa

and Tom Pickering had left, I went to see the foreign minister and I said, “Look, you ought to take care of this. There are groups in the United States—non-Zionist Jewish groups, such as the Hasidic Jews in New York— who would be happy to provide Torahs. They would see it as a fraternal matter. They would come here. They would pose no problem for you or Israel, which still doesn't like them. But they would give to these people something they have a right to have. “You admit they have a right to practice their religion.” So, the Yemenis did that. The Torahs began to come in. Of course, it attracted more attention to the Jews who lived in Yemen and there was a raised a certain amount of interest in the Israeli issue. The Israelis, however, in those days were much more concerned with getting the Jews out of the Soviet Union and out of Eastern Europe. That was a huge campaign.

Again, to jump ahead to many years later when I was in charge of the Arabian Peninsula, the campaign to get Jews out of the Soviet Union had by and large succeeded after a tremendous diplomatic effort on our part. Well worthwhile, I think. The groups that had been successfully involved in that effort were turning around and looking for other opportunities (Ethiopia, Sudan, and Yemen) to help emigration. I didn't want to see our relationship with Yemen put under that type of pressure. I persuaded people to let me try to work out something for six months or so. I made an alliance with this wonderful professor at Yeshiva University and worked quietly over a period of year or so. We brought the government around. In the final analysis, without any fuss at all, all of the Jews who wanted to leave were permitted to do so and those who wanted to stay are living a normal life, coming and going, working as serious merchants.

Q: At one point (I think this was even before your time), the Yemeni Jews were a significant factor in Israel.

RANSOM: They still are. They came out of Yemen after the war. A head tax was put on which was paid to the old imam and he allowed the Jews to leave. They went out through Aden in what was called “Operation Magic Carpet.” They were mostly merchants, silversmiths, and craftsmen, with very long and strong traditions of their own. They

maintained their communities in Israel. They had the highest rate, at least among the women, of exogamy of any of the Sephardic Jews. Men didn't have much luck with Ashkenazi women, but the Yemeni women were regarded as beautiful, wonderful, and charming, as indeed they were. Yemenis made a mark for themselves in music and silver and to some extent in clothing and lines of style. But they are not nearly as organized or as purposeful a community as the Russian Jews are now.

Q: What about UN votes? There was always a shopping list of UN votes during this time.

RANSOM: We weren't doing terribly well in those days in the UN. The pressure to get people to vote with us came and went, but it wasn't something we could use as a test of a relationship. By and large, the Yemenis didn't vote with us on any Arab-Israeli issues. They didn't vote with us on most Third World issues. They regarded themselves as independent. Even when the Saudis supported us, they did not. That wasn't a large or strong part of the relationship.

Q: You left there in September 1978. Was there anything we didn't cover, other events or issues?

RANSOM: It was a wonderful time in our life. Marjorie had gone back to work after seven years in the house and she was inspirited by new phase of her life. Our lives were being cast in a new mold; Marjorie still had to run the house but we had help for the children and she had a job and a different relationship with me. I did a lot with the kids. So, we fashioned new roles for ourselves and a new way to live. It was by and large very successful.

Q: In 1978, whither?

RANSOM: In 1978, I was reassigned to Washington. I went to the Defense Department. I had been recruited for this job by a very able man named Bob Murray, who was working at

that time in the Near East section of the International Security Agency (ISA). It turned out to be a wonderful assignment.

Q: You were doing this from 1978 to when?

RANSOM: It was quite a long time— 1978 to almost 1982, I guess.

Q: In ISA?

RANSOM: In ISA. Four years practically. The State Department may think of itself as the dominant voice in foreign affairs and in many ways it is, but Defense has a lot of input of its own. In fact, it has two voices. Every principal's meeting was attended by a member of the JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff) and a representative of the office of the secretary of defensei.e. a representative of the civilian side of the Pentagon. ISA was part of the office of the secretary. Defense was the only agency that had two voices at the meeting. State had one voice. CIA had a voice. The NSC had a voice. If there were any other agency involved, it only had one representative.

For most of the Middle Eastern issues, I ended up with a large influence in what DOD's position was going to be. I went to an awful lot of those meetings in the White House in the situation room. I also testified before Congress. I did a lot of traveling and negotiated arms deals. I was involved in matters with extraordinary responsibility, far beyond my mid-rank in the Foreign Service. But I think it's fair to say that if you're not in the Department of State, you don't get full credit for what you do when it comes to promotion panel time. Even though I was filling the role the equivalent of a deputy assistant secretary of State and in some way almost that of an assistant secretary of State with my presence at White House meetings and my involvement with high-ranking visitors, that didn't seem to cut much ice.

Q: What was your geographic responsibility?

RANSOM: The Near East and Africa. I started as the deputy director of the office and then I became acting director of the office for a long time.

Q: Let's talk first about Africa and then we'll move on to the Near East. What were some of the issues that you were dealing with in Africa from 1978-1982?

RANSOM: DOD didn't have many military sales or other programs in Africa except in Ethiopia. We had large concerns about the situation in Somalia,—missiles near the Straits and things like that. If the truth be told, there was a small group of men and one woman who worked for me in the African area; I didn't spend much time on those issues, in part because Defense was not much involved in African issues.

Q: Except the Horn of Africa. You've already talked about the overthrow of Haile Selassie and the Mengistu regime. I think this was a time when there was a big flip-flop, wasn't it? The Soviets decided to put their money on the Ethiopian side and we began to move into Somalia.

RANSOM: That is right.

Q: Can you talk about that?

RANSOM: In the aftermath of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, there developed a major concern in the administration that we had to do something to draw the line in the sand. The question became: what states in this area would give us military access? I remember producing a list: Kenya, Somalia, and Oman. We went on a trip to those three countries and proposed military access agreements much to the dismay of the State Department, which felt we were doing something very risky. Reggie Bartholomew, the director of the PM bureau in State, was on the American team. We negotiated the actual agreements. That was a lot of fun, but there were some very tense and disagreeable moments with my colleagues in the State Department.

Carter was defeated in 1979. Mr. Reagan came in. I was at that time the acting director. I was told by Frank Carlucci, the incoming deputy secretary, and by my boss that Defense wanted me to become the director. I said, “Well, I'd stay for that. I'd be glad to.” I was called to a meeting in the secretary's office to meet with a very attractive young women named Mary Jane Bachelor — blond, leggy, and sweet. She was the White House personnel chief for DOD staffing. After we had talked a while, I was smiling and very happy in her company. She said she had three questions. First, did I vote for Ronald Reagan? I said, well, she might think it odd that I had as a matter of principle never to disclose to anyone who I voted for. I served the nation and I served the president. She said, “Well, it's a very important issue. We want to know if you voted for Ronald Reagan.” I said, “Well, I can tell you that I will serve him. I have served his predecessor.” She said, “That doesn't help.” I said, “And I'll serve the next president” That didn't help. “And I'll serve him loyally and fully.” “No, we have to know if you voted for him.” I said, “Well, I don't have many principles that I wouldn't bend in exceptional circumstances, but I do have some principles that I won't bend. This just happens to be one.”

She said, “Well, let's go on to the second question. Do you support the political philosophy of Ronald Reagan and George Bush?” I said, “Look, I'm not paid to have a philosophy. I am in the Foreign Service. I serve. I am a servant. I expect to be able to voice opinions when policy is made, but I take orders and then I do it. I am like an admiral or a general. You don't want to ask admirals and generals how they voted and what their political beliefs are. If you do, the next administration will come along and cast out all your admirals and generals and friends. Then we'll turn the bureaucracy into an ideological jousting round. This is a bad idea.” She said, “You have to answer the question.” I said, “I won't do it. I'll take orders and do what I am told. That is my idea of how a Foreign Service officer and a general is supposed to perform.”

She said, “Well, you're down two. Let's try the third question. Will you serve Ronald Reagan loyally?” I said, “I'll serve him loyally and well as I served his predecessor.” By

this time, I was a little perturbed. “And I'll serve the next president the same way.” She said, “You fail. You can't have the job.” I said, “If that's your decision, I want you to know I accept.” I've always been rather proud of that because now that I am out of the Foreign Service, I will be glad to admit for the public record that I had voted for Ronald Reagan. But I was not going to tell her that. That may seem ridiculous, but that is something I felt very strongly about. I think this is probably the first time I've ever told anybody how I voted in an election, except for my wife, of course.

After that interview, I went back to see my boss — a new political appointee in charge of ISA [International Security Affairs] — a man by the name of Bing West, of whom I had become rather fond. I said, “I'm afraid I can't help you. I was asked these questions which I was not going to answer. But I don't have any job. I want you to know that I'm not going to make any fuss. I'm going to go back to State and start looking for a job over there. They won't ask me questions like that. It's a hell of a note to have to go back after everything is filled up and the personnel cycle is over for this year in State; but never mind. I am out of here. I just wanted to let you to know what will happen. You are going to be the first assistant secretary of ISA who will be given an appointee who is a Zionist, terribly eager to reshape our policy towards the Arab world in a dozen different ways. His name is Noel Cook and he is waiting in the wings. You are going to have a lot of trouble. My problem is your problem.” Then I got up and walked out.

I went home; we had guests for dinner and I was feeling morose, upset, and had an awful lot to drink. I almost never do this type of thing. About 10:30 at night when I was deep in my cups, the phone rang. It was Bing West. He said, “I talked to Carlucci and he said that you are probably never going to be approved for the director's job and therefore we will not ask for approval. We will just keep you there in an acting capacity. Do you mind?” I said, “No, I don't mind. I'll be glad to do it. By God, you can count on me.” And that is what happened.

So, once again, I was dealt with fairly. I stayed on in that position as acting director of the Near East and Africa office fighting all those battles with State, Arabs, Israelis, and others. I did that for almost four years. Then I left and went to the War College.

Q: What happened to Noel Cook? How did you know he was waiting?

RANSOM: He was a political appointee. I had talked to him when he thought that I was leaving and that he would be coming in to take my job. He had been the lobbyist for Zionists of America, the ZOA, which is a real grassroots organization with a large membership, mostly aging. It is very right-wing in terms of politics of the Middle East. There is no equivocation in his views, I think. He was a bright enough guy. He was given another job in ISA and told not to have anything to do with the Near East. Cook was a tough guy, a smart guy. This wasn't what he wanted. But when the decision was made he lived up to it honorably.

Q: Let's talk about Somalia before we move on to the rest of the Middle East. Had we written off Ethiopia at that point and put our bets on Somalia? How did we see that at this time?

RANSOM: Siad Barre's switch after he was abandoned by the Soviets didn't put him in a very good light. He hadn't been in a good light before and it was worst afterwards.

Q: In a good light with whom?

RANSOM: With people in Washington. He had connived or conspired against us before and done a lot of things that seemed to favor the Soviets, giving them access to their bases which then threatened control of the Red Sea. So, he didn't have a lot of credit with us. When the Soviets abandoned him, a lot of people thought that we shouldn't accept his offers of friendship; they just weren't sincere or dependable or honorable. We wanted something very limited from him which we in fact got. It never really amounted to much, but we wanted some limited port facilities, a little bit of storage space and a place for some

communications facility. We focused on being pre-positioned near the Gulf so that we could get there in a hurry if needed. We were preparing for Afghanistan to be the first domino to fall followed perhaps by Iran. That was the jewel in the crown of the Gulf. We needed to be in a better position to off-et these potential Soviet moves. But in the post-Vietnam period, Ronald Reagan was reluctant to move very far in the Gulf area. Foreign policy experts and economists were disappointed. We ended up asking people to side with us when they weren't sure that we'd come to their rescue in a time of need. Of course, all that got put to rest in the Gulf War. That was a long time off.

Q: Let's turn to the Middle East, from the DoD side. You got to DoD in 1978. In 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan; the Shah was gone by this time; our embassy in Tehran had been seized. Did we predict a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Iran down to the Persian Gulf?

RANSOM: No, I think you have to realize that we were seeing Soviet incursions around the world - in Latin America, in Africa, in the Horn of Africa, and in Afghanistan. It had worked in Vietnam. The proxy wars supported by the Soviets were intended to eliminate our leverage and tax our strength. If Reagan did anything when he was in power, it was to turn these things against the Soviet Union by insuring that their policy was accompanied by a huge hemorrhaging of treasure and reputation. I was in favor of that. Particularly in Afghanistan, I worked very hard to provide the rebels with the weapons and support they needed . We eventually managed to provide essential weapons, although we had a tremendous fight to get Stinger missiles in there.

Q: I was going to ask you about that. I would imagine there would be a big fight within the military establishment when it was recommended providing these relatively sophisticated ground-to-air missiles to the ragtag troops — so-called Afghan rebels.

RANSOM: This was essentially a CIA operation although obtaining the funding and equipment involved the Defense Department. It was not automatic or quick. The decision

to provide Stinger missiles came only after there was a decision to make Soviet missiles in an old factory in Egypt so that we would have had deniability about our missile deliveries to the Afghan rebels. I thought this was utterly ridiculous. In fact, our plan failed on all accounts. It was not deniable. The missile often didn't work and were very expensive and slow. Eventually we simply decided that we were going to supply the Stinger missile. All those people who had opposed this weapon transfers were proven, I think— completely wrong on all accounts in terms of the reaction of the Soviets, the impact on the fighting, the reaction of our friends, etc. Our friends wanted us in general to be strong and to act forcefully. While they may have complained at times that we acted too forcefully, the alternative of not acting or acting weakly always unsettled them more. In terms of building a coalition, you can be cooperative, reasonable, and high-minded, and I think we should be, but we also have to be very, very firm in making it clear what we want to do. We come slowly to these things. That is probably a good idea because we're such a powerful country. We can make big mistakes if we move too rapidly. So the “slow but persistent” has to be the model for how we worked.

Q: How were we seeing Iran at that time?

RANSOM: In the aftermath of the collapse of the Shah's regime, there were large questions as to what to do. I went over to State and talked to my friends there. They felt that we should be somehow trying to reestablish a relationship with Iran. It was very hard to do because Khomeini was not a very reasonable man. Our friends in Iran were being killed and pushed out. The Israelis were very unhappy about what was happening there. Iran's neighbors, our friends in the Gulf, were very, very upset by events in Iran. Yazdi was the foreign minister of Iran; he was an American educated radical who had joined the government not as a cleric but as part of what he thought to be a the democratic left or reformist side of the Revolution. He was not really a communist in any sense of the word, but he had dealings with the Soviets when they were on the outs with Iran.

It was agreed that there would be a meeting between the Iranians and us. I was told that at that meeting, we were going to make an effort to see if we could reestablish a relationship. I drew up a list of talking points for DoD.. Our team would have consisted of Bernie Graves from the Defense Security Supply Agency, a women who was the under secretary for Security Affairs (I can't remember her name right now, but she was always very well turned out and very energetic.), and David McGifford, the assistant secretary for the Near East of ISA. I wrote down everything I could think of that we could do for the Iranians at that time. It was about a three page list. I said, “This is an encyclopedia. If I were there, I'm not sure I would read it all through, but if there is a response, you can go from part A to B to C to D. You have a lot here to deal with.”

At the meeting, our team went through the entire list and got all the responses that they wanted. In retrospect, it's clear that this led directly to the seizure of the embassy. The clerical group was not going to sit tight while students were painting the United States as the “great Satan.” I really didn't understand that at the time the embassy was seized. I didn't have the wit to imagine how these things were connected. But it became clear after Bazarjan resigned and other things happened that we were dealing with a group of the most antagonistic and unattractive rulers. We got drawn into the internal feuds on the issue of the hostages. I was only on the periphery of all of that.

Q: Did you get involved in Desert One and the attempt to rescue the hostages?

RANSOM: Very peripherally. It was a very closely held operation. I was very upset when it failed. We were trying to build up our forces in the Gulf at the time and do things to reassure the Saudis in particular. That involved us in the sales of aircraft and weapons to our friends in the region. There had a huge fight over the sale of F-15s and then over the AWACS sale with the Israelis complaining bitterly that their enemies were being armed. They complained just long enough for us to come up with eight new aid packages for Israel and then they stopped complaining.

Q: Maybe you were not, but I would think you would have been at the gap of what the Israelis were after, which was essentially military equipment, which must have sort of rankled the Department of Defense.

RANSOM: Israel didn't have many friends in the Department of Defense. They had a few, all of them political appointees. Everybody else did what our policy makers told us to do. The Israelis, of course, were split themselves in lots of ways. One group felt that it was very important that we continue to supply Iran with military equipment against Iraq and keep that war going because Iraq was a bigger threat to Israel than Iran. Of course, all that led to the shipment of military equipment from Israel to Iran in one of those convoluted policies we sometime devise for the Middle East. Peace and stability was hard to achieve. The politics of Israel and the policies of Israel loom very large in the American decision-making on the Middle East no matter what the issue is - not just the peace process, but all of our security relationships. They feel like they should have a large say in what we do. Others feel they should be taken into consideration without being given any kind of great authority. It's an unresolved problem. They win some and they lose some. The shift toward Israel has been extraordinary, however. Military aid in particular is gigantic. But it's not the type of military aid that we have anyplace else. There is no military mission. U.S. training is minimal. They just get the money and are allowed to spend it through their mission in New York. We have very little to do with it. There was no approval process or any kind of record system. There were no disputes there, political or otherwise. There was no judgment made on whether it was appropriate or not. The funds were just passed off to the Israelis.

Q: Basically, Congress had taken that issue and had run with it.

RANSOM: That's right. It was entirely outside of DoD channels.

Q: What about Iraq during this time?

RANSOM: That was another policy in which I was involved up to my ears. I think I was quite successful in selling my point of view in what our Iraq policy should be. I argued in the aftermath of all of what happened in Iran that, while we could not hope to make Iraq a friend, we needed to tilt towards Iraq. I am a “balance-of- power” guy even more than a coalition warrior. The tilt towards Iraq became a very controversial policy with, first, the Israelis and then lots of other people opposing it. But on this case, we had the support of all of the Arab community and of the Gulf community. There were limits as to what we were willing to do. The policy started out with a very modulated and discriminating form of support.

I think even at that level it was useful. I thought it was terribly important that Iraq was not defeated. But also we never wanted to provide enough equipment and support to allow Iraq to defeat Iran. That policy was successful and was carried out over a period of years. It came to an abrupt end largely though the ridiculous arrogance of Saddam Hussein. I don't think anybody could have foreseen that he would actually invade Kuwait, but he did.

Another policy that I was involved in at DoD was very interesting. It created new institutions and new activities on the Middle Eastern diplomatic front which primarily concerned Egypt. In the period I was in DoD, we established for the first time in a very, very long time, a military supply relationship with Egypt. I went to Cairo and set up a joint military commission there and then helped to host the Egyptian generals when they came to Washington. During one of these visits a very funny episode took place. The first group of Egyptian generals came to Washington to talk about military assistance, which we handled very differently from the Soviets. They came on a snowy winter evening when about an inch of snow fell. An inch of snow in Washington was enough to paralyze the city and we actually were trapped in the Pentagon. We couldn't get a car to come and take them to their damn hotel. So, we were sitting there in the Secretary's office with these generals. They were, of course, speaking in Arabic. They looked like Soviet generals with their hair combed back and their uniforms cut in the same fashion. They had been

around the Soviets so long that being in the office of the secretary of Defense was a very unsettling event for them. It was a little bit too much for me, too. I wasn't sure that these were people we could completely trust. One of them looked out at the snowy scene with cars creeping along the road even with only an inch of snow and said, “You know, in the Soviet Union, this wouldn't stop anything.” It was really a very interesting question about their shift of alliances. Was it wise? They really had no choice. Neither did we. They made the best of it. So did we. It has become a very strong relationship. But I always remember were poignantly that question in Arabic in the office of the secretary of Defense.

Q: There is the story that I've heard that on one day the Egyptians were talking and they were saying that the Soviet basic military doctrine there for them in the Middle East was, “Hang on as hard as you can and wait for winter.”

RANSOM: Right. Which is fine, but not in the Middle East.

Q: Was there any concern about taking over the Egyptian supply function at the DoD with friends of Israel and others objecting?

RANSOM: The Israelis bit the bullet and they didn't oppose our assistance to Egypt at all. In Congress and elsewhere, the word was passed to stop complaining. But the equipment that was to be provided had to be carefully reviewed. I remember writing a memo to the head of a military mission that we wanted in Egypt to survey system capabilities and such. That was one of the few times when one of my memos was heavily edited. It seemed just too controversial to say that we were building up an Egyptian friend who would never stand against the Israelis for a minute. But that had to be the underlying theme of our military relationship. So, jet aircraft of certain types, bombs of certain types, artillery, etc. were delivered.

What was most befuddling to the Egyptians was the way we did military assistance. We had tremendous arguments with Egyptian generals and the general staff about this. We couldn't make them understand how we did it. Not what we did. That wasn't the only issue.

It was how we did it. Finally, I remember at one point stopping this discussion and saying to one of these generals, “How did you do it when you went to the Soviet Union?” He said, “Ah, we took this big list and put everything on it that we wanted. A huge list.” I said, “Well, you've done that with us.” “Yes,” he said, “We went to the Soviet Union and demanded it. They would go away for about a week and then come back and say, 'This is what you get' and they'd give you a list of equipment. I said, “Well, we do it differently. Congress votes a sum of money. In your case, it's $1.2 billion. Then you decide how to spend it. When we spend it for you, our military services procure the equipment in your interest because they procure the same equipment for themselves. You get the economies of scale and you get their expertise. That is the way it works. So, if you decide that you want an aircraft carrier, then nobody in the air force and the army gets anything. If you decide you only want a minesweeper, there is going to be more money for the air force and the army. You've got your work cut out for you. Your coming in here with a list just won't do You've got to work with the system that we have. This is the same system we use for everybody in the world,” except, of course, the Israelis. Anyway, the process was very complicated for them, but they eventually figured it out. We have now a very big military mission in Cairo that does training, delivery, quality control, and all of that. Arms supply to Egypt goes on.

Q: I would imagine we had a peculiar policy for arms supplies. On the one hand, we didn't want them to have enough to really pose a threat to Israel . On the other hand, we would have liked them to be able to give Libya a very rough time.

RANSOM: Yes. One of the goals of our arms supply program was, as we argued very firmly, that the Egyptians should be reducing the size of their armed forces, as an economy measure. They didn't need all these broken down Soviet planes and tanks and such that had been given so liberally without any support and training on how to use or maintain them. So, we were involved not just in force modernization and improvement but also in force structure changes. That was hard for the Egyptians.

At one point, I went with Carlucci to the Middle East. We were taken out to an Egyptian air base. It was near the Suez Canal. It had been extensively damaged during the 1973 war. It had not been repaired, but it still had some bunkers with airplanes. We went in to see one of these MIGs. It was armed with missiles and had an" alert" crew standing by. It looked like it had been maintained with a hammer. The whole surface was dented and pounded. The seats were cracked. Carlucci said, "This is your fast reaction force here?." "Yes," said the air force commander, a very rotund man, a brigadier general. Carlucci said, "Could you scramble three planes?" The obese general didn't know what to say, so he said, "Yes." Then the comic opera ensued. The general lumbered out onto the runway; he had a flare gun in his hand. He fired a flare up into the air. I don't know why he communicated that way; maybe the telephone lines had been knocked out. But after he did that, quite a while passed and then some barracks' doors opened and pilots and crew members started coming out. They walked across the hot runway to their bunkers. There were three planes. Then from two of the bunkers, we heard eventually the engine begin to wind up. But in the third, they couldn't get the damn engine started. Finally, they came roaring up out of this pit in the earth. There was a ramp that took you up to the runway level. They went lumbering down the runway and they turned at the end and then they just sat there for the longest time. One would start and the other would go forward. I don't know what kind of problem they were having taking off together as a pair, which is what they were trying to do. They eventually got into the air. It must have been 25 minutes— "fast reaction force." It was clearly an indication that while the Israelis were good, they were lucky to have Arabs as opponents.

Q: Were you in DoD during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon?

RANSOM: Yes, I was. I was asked to deal with some of the media networks on this issue because the Pentagon was being flooded by stories about why this took place. I was trying to put it in a larger perspective. It was a bitter time.

Q: I would think. This was really a turning point in American-Israeli relations, obviously not completely, but it took the bloom was off the rose.

RANSOM: In fact, the Israelis were never restrained very much by us or Western Europe. It was a disastrous policy, far too ambitious, foolish, brutal.

Q: What was the estimate of Ariel Sharon at that point?

RANSOM: Ariel Sharon was a man I happened to admire as a military leader, but not much as a political leader. He was regarded as dangerously impulsive, although he was smart, too, which made it worse. But he got away with bloody murder. We had a hard time standing up to the Israelis politically on a variety of issues and treating them like any other ally with just many problems.

Q: What happened after the end of your DoD tour?

RANSOM: I went on from there to the War College to decompress and then I went off to Abu Dhabi again as DCM with Marjorie as PAO. Once again, it was a case of leaving a job where I had a lot of policy responsibilities and a lot of exposure at the highest levels of our government and taking a job that was good for the two of us together. Once again, there was some amazement that someone like myself who had testified before Congress and had gone to the meetings of principals and had done all this other stuff would take such an obscure job. But again, I have no regrets looking back on it. I am very happy that Marjorie and I made this life together. It was wonderful, rich, and beautiful. Furthermore I got very, very tired of DoD. The pressure of work was relentless. I felt I was constantly digging myself into a hole as far as the State department was concerned. I wasn't getting promoted. I didn't know exactly what to do about it. I must admit that I thought at times about leaving the department of State and doing something else. There was so much work in DoD. There was so much tension. There was so much pressure.

When I finally got the War College, I found out just how much of that pressure I had been under. In the first week, we were given a battery of psychological and other tests. This was set up for military officers, not for Foreign Service officers. I took it anyway. I remember being given a test that showed the degree of aggressiveness. They asked us two pages of questions about what we did, etc? The scoring was on a paper that had a red side and a blue side. The blue side was cool and laid back and the red side was very warlike. The military all expected me to come out on the very blue side of the page. In fact, I came out all the way to the right because I had been so seared and burned in DoD for all these years with fights with everybody. I am not by nature combative. I am not a truculent, disagreeable person, but in a bureaucracy you do get into these fights. It was the nature of the policy development process. Then you had to do it again the next week. I got tired of it. One had to conspire with people to get things done and build coalitions and they were constantly shifting. You didn't want to lose, but winning took a big toll. Personally at homeaway from the office— we were a very happy family and had lots of friends. But that was a slow promotion time in my career. But I found out that I needed very much the year at the War College just to decompress.

Q: There are two things I'd like to cover before we move to the War College. You said you testified before Congress. I would like to cover that. The other was that you went to the White House for the principals' discussions of issues. I wonder if we could cover those during your DoD time. Then we'll cover the War College and then go on to Abu Dhabi.

RANSOM: In the course of my assignment to ISA, I was a middle rank officer at the time. Nevertheless, I was sent up to Congress with much higher ranking State department representatives to testify before a number of committees— government operations, appropriations sub- committees that made money available for building bases and facilities overseas and the House International Relations Committee. I went up to brief various senators and congressmen on specific projects that had to do with our military in the Middle East. I found myself the beneficiary of being in the right place at the right time.

Someone from Defense often had to go to these congressional hearings. They were welcomed in Congress. Since I was well known at State, people would have accept me to appear along with them.

The same thing was true of the meetings in the White House, where I frequently got taken along and was even left as the chief Defense representative at meetings in the situation room on emergency issues of one sort or another. It's not wise to push this too far because I was not the only DoD representative all the time. But occasionally, that was the case. Therefore, I became a kind of a regular attendee at these meetings, accepted as such. It was for someone of my position and background a heady experience. I think that at times this was difficult for my colleagues in the department of State to accept because it was not usual for a mid-career officer to take the trips I did, to lead the delegations that I did, to deal with the issues that I did, to attend the meetings that I did, to give the testimony that I did; it was unusual. There was undoubtedly some jealously. Of course, whenever there was a disagreement between State and Defense - as there often was - I had to reflect the views of my boss against those of the State department. So while we had constant and steady communications with State, they were not always smooth and I think there was some question in their mind of divided loyalties. It was very difficult to get good personal efficiency reports out of State for that reason. The reports out of Defense, while they were glowing, did not have as much weight in the State department promotion system.

I was at that time nominally a member of the Political-Military Bureau in the Department of Stateas were most of the State detailees to Defense—but I almost never went there and had very little really to do with them. I worked much more closely with various other offices in the State department, but for the most part, we were doing things that the Defense department did more or less on its own. It turns out that there is a great deal of that. If you think about the structure of the national security decisions, at every meeting on emergency actions or on policy that takes place in the White House, there are two representatives from the Department of Defense. One is the JCS representative, who is supposed to give military advice and nothing more. The other is the representative of the Secretary

of Defense, who was always from the office that I worked for—the civilian side. He was supposed to give the secretary's view. The secretary of Defense's view of some issues like the peace process were not very well developed and it was easy to represent them.

Q: You're talking about the peace process in Israel.

RANSOM: Yes. That was the easy part. But if the subject was on how to deal with Iran, or Egypt— issues of national security rather than pure diplomacy— there were views that were felt very strongly by Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Carlucci. We had vigorously put forth those views. Our representations were made more difficult by the fact that Mr. Weinberger really didn't get along very well with Al Haig and then George Schultz. In fact, they could hardly sit in the same room with each other. Therefore, the personal rivalry between the two secretaries made the natural tension between Defense and State into much more of an ideological rivalry.

Q: You went to the War College from when to when?

RANSOM: I went to the War College after I left the Department of Defense. That was 1982 and I attended the War College for one year. By 1982, I was feeling very, very frazzled and worn out by Defense Department work-load which included a liberal dose of trips, Congressional testimony and White House meetings which often included conflicts over policy. The hours at DoD seemed to be interminable—weekends as well as evenings. The War College came at the right moment allowing me to decompress. I even went over to George Washington and signed up for a course in modern American poetry, a magnificent decision in retrospect. While I considered myself a writer and produced words on paper every day, it suddenly became clear to me how stultified my words were. The American poetry course immersed me in grand expressions and magnificent lines from men and some women who were dealing with life, death, sex, family, nature, beauty, and all kinds of other things. The teacher was magnificent. The course was superb.

I found myself in the course of that year getting back on my feet and getting ready for the next assignment. My fellow students were marvelous. I generally like military officers. I admired them for what they were. We were with some of the best from all the services. For the military, the National War College in particular is one of the most sought assignments. For the Foreign Service, it just another tour which is not likely to lead to a promotion and people don't seek to go there.

Q: This is true of any training assignment.

RANSOM: This is true of any training assignment. But I just thought the year at the National War College was a wonderful time. I made lots of friends who subsequently became three and four star officers in the military - Wes Clark, Rich Neil, Howell Desdis, others. They were all just wonderful men. The courses were set up for them, not for the Foreign Service. Therefore, it gave them an awful lot of stuff that most Foreign Service officers already knew and had previously absorbed. So, we always looked like we were particularly smart in the class. We also drafted well and spoke well. We had an easy understanding of foreign policy, how it was made, overseas life, and things like this. So, we added a lot to the mix.

Q: I've often heard that because of the thrust of the War College often the Foreign Service officers were seen an extra faculty. They were a resource to explain things. These were subjects with which we had been dealing with all our professional lives.

RANSOM: That is true, but any Foreign Service officer who is worth his or her salt found that when in the War College they were studying with men who were magnificently trained in their own right and who were superb public servants and great men. So, we gained from the year as well.

Q: You're dealing with leaders and we don't produce leaders, as the military has to.

RANSOM: We don't produce leaders. We don't take care of our people. We don't have the support system in the Foreign Service anything close to what military has. Frankly, there isn't a training program in the Foreign Service as good as there is in the military. Most of my fellow students had spent a quarter to a third of their time in various academic settings. You just can't go through that experience without absorbing something from books and from other people and from a variety of thoughts.

The Foreign Service is easily the most trainable group in the United States government and yet we have no program worth a damn to drill into people what it means to make foreign policy. We should. It's one of the great deficiencies. Nothing has ever happened to remedy this situation over the years and I'm sure nothing ever will. I think the Foreign Service Institute provides an outstanding language study program and perhaps a few area study courses. The Foreign Service Institute does nothing to train personnel in the core functions of diplomacy. Such subjects as the negotiation process, issues of how foreign policy is made, the role of presidential leadership, failures in foreign policy execution, Congress and foreign policy— these are subjects that a Foreign Service officer is just expected to absorb from the daily newspapers. They do a pretty good job of that, but wouldn't it be better if a tour at the Foreign Service Institute were required for every officer at specified periods of his or her career. It's not.

Q: In a way, we hope that's what we're doing here... Our program is not government sponsored, which makes it quite difficult because there is no government funding for it, but we hope these oral histories in time can be used as a resource.

RANSOM: I think oral histories are a fantastic idea and I just hope the Foreign Service makes use of them, although I think that scholars and other people will find them fascinating to listen to as well. This is a wonderful program and I am delighted to be taking part in it.

Q: In 1983, whither?

RANSOM: Once again, Marjorie and I decided on a post where we could both serve. We had done this once before when I came out of the National Security Council and went to Yemen from 1975-1978. You will recall that we had worked it out at that time for me to be DCM in Yemen and she to be the public affairs officer. Having set that example, we went on to Abu Dhabi. I've often thought that leaving my post in Defense where I had been fairly prominent in my area and going off to be DCM in Abu Dhabi might be seen by some as a demotion that I would not have taken if I had not been part of a tandem couple. I can tell you that we once again thought that we were very lucky to have good jobs and good jobs together.

Q: You were in Abu Dhabi from when to when?

RANSOM: 1983-1985. We had a wonderful ambassador, Quincey Lumsden, whom we liked very, very much. He was a thoughtful, cautious man with a great deal of charm and generosity. He was well versed in the area. He had served in many different places. He and his wife were magnificent hosts and hostesses and Marjorie and I got along with them extremely well. The post was not an easy one for people who were interested in being active, as Marjorie and I were. Frankly, it was difficult to make contacts with Abu Dhabi citizens. They were only emerging from a very simple state to racing through an oil boom which brought tons of money into the area.

Q: Was Dubai in that area?

RANSOM: Yes, Dubai was in that area. They also were very cautious in foreign policy, deferring in some ways to Saudi Arabia, in some ways wary of Iran—not too certain how much they wanted to be involved in the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council]. In any case, they were not interested really in cooperating with us on military or security matters because of Vietnam and their perception of our inability to commit forces in large numbers overseas. We had a small force in the Gulf. One of the things I tried to do was to raise the number of ship visits from two a year in Abu Dhabi to six or eight. While we succeeded, the difficulty

was astounding when you compare it to the Gulf War when we put 500,000 troops into the area with the support of all the local governments.

So, the first year in Abu Dhabi was in many ways a slow one. We tried to get around the country. There are many sheikhdoms. We traveled up and down. We visited ruling families. I often thought that we had more contact with the ruling families than the ruling families had with each other because we were always asked about the others that we had visited.

Q: What did Abu Dhabi consist of?

RANSOM: Abu Dhabi was one emirate among eight which called themselves the United Arab Emirates. The constitution made it very clear that each emirate had veto power and independent judgment on all matters of foreign policy and defense. Essentially the UAE had a customs unit, a common currency, and one member, Abu Dhabi, who was prepared to pay the bills of all of them. So, through financing of roads, schools, health facilities, and such, Abu Dhabi government gained a considerable sway which made it look like there was a unified government. In fact, in Dubai, you saw the fallacy of all of this. In Dubai, all of those bills - the roads, schools, and health - were paid by the Dubai government, which had an independent oil income. They counted that as their contribution to the UAE federal budget. In fact, they operated very quietly and politely in a completely autonomous and independent fashion. To do anything in Dubai, you went to Dubai authorities and worked it out with them. In fact, it was easier for a U.S. Air Force plane to get a landing clearance in Dubai (I could do that with a telephone call.) than it was for a UAE labeled helicopter or plane to get landing permission in Dubai. But in the canny ways that Arabs have in this part of the world, the system worked because they were not willing to make a fuss over anything, beyond preserving their family, tribal, and regional independence while holding up their system to the world empathizing bonds of friendship with their neighbors In any case, there was so damn much money flowing in that it would have been amazing if disputes had emerged.

Abu Dhabi was also very lucky in having as its leader a man who everybody in that part of the world liked and respected, Sheikh Zayed. It had basically a very tolerant political system. After Abu Dhabi, I was to go to Syria, where the jails were filled with political prisoners. There was no political prisoner in the UAthen or now. There is a fair amount of dissension that is known and tolerated, but the government focuses almost entirely on the threat to it from outside forces, not on inside forces. So, that made it a rather nice place to live and work.

Q: How about succession? When I was in Dhahran back in the late 1950s, I don't think there was a single one of the ruling houses where there hadn't been coups, assassinations, all kind of inter-family disputes as far as successions went. Had they sorted this out pretty well by your time?

RANSOM: There is in place now in Abu Dhabi a succession scheme which is likely to work. It involves the oldest son of Sheikh Zayed, Khalifa, who would take over from his father. But that does not really sort out the UAE succession because it doesn't address who will be the president of the UAE, who will be foreign minister, defense minister, etc. I think it also does not sort out the longer term succession issue — what portfolios will be run by what sons, what cousins. These systems decisions are reached within family and tribal councils with a fair amount of sophistication. I would be surprised if there would be either no surprises or much dissent. It will work, but not quite the way we think it will. We don't know exactly how it will come out. But in the end, I think all of those countries are going to end up looking and acting pretty much the way they do now.

Q: How about the relations with Iran? There has always been this trading back and forth. How did the UAE view Iran and also Iraq in these days?

RANSOM: This is a complicated question. Dubai had very strong relationships with Iran based on trade and entrepot services and they were never going to reduce those. In fact, they have expanded them. During my tour, it was strong and growing. The UAE was

always much more cautious about Iran. Trade didn't exist and many of the oil producing islands in the Gulf that belonged to the UAE were impossible to defend against Iran. The sense of threat on the part of the UAE government was very great. There was also a genuine and strong tension between the Persian speakers and the Arabic speakers in the Gulf. There was an even deeper tension between Shia and Sunni. There was a tension between tribal families and non-tribal families. There were many Arab families in Abu Dhabi and in Dubai who were Sunni Muslim Arabs, but of Iranian ancestry. They were not part of the tribal system which rules in the Gulf countries. So, they were always slightly on the outside and trying to fit in. The jigsaw puzzle was very complicated. But there was a consensus in those countries on the way business would be conducted and by and large it worked.

Q: What was the impact of the Iran-Iraq War at this time?

RANSOM: The general feeling on that part of the rulers of Abu Dhabi, of Dubai and of the other emirates was that these two countries deserved their war with each other. The important goal was that neither would win. If there had been a predominant power in that part of the world, either Iraqi or Iranian, that would have posed a very large security threat.

That is, of course, what eventually happened and it led, as these rulers feared, directly to the invasion of Kuwait. The Iraqis eventually defeated the Iranians. The Iranians were forced to withdraw from the battlefield and end the war. They could not sustain combat any longer. The Iraqis then turned around and invaded Kuwait. I believe they would have invaded other countries eventually to take over even more of the oil resources of that part of the world. The balance of power in the Gulf - and I think that's the only way to look at it - rests with two predominant states, Iraq and Iran; the other GCC states cannot maintain defense against either of those two in any kind of contest. Therefore, the balance between the two powers seems to them to be critically important. The other states, so much smaller, want to accommodate the bigger states rather than confront them. Their traditional policy is one of appeasement of both Iraq and Iran rather than confrontation.

That is why the situation in the Gulf right now is so unnatural. The GCC is in a state of confrontation with Iraq. What they really want is for Iraq to be a strong state, so that it can balance Iran.

Q: At this time, 1983-1985, what were we trying to do in Abu Dhabi and the Gulf states?

RANSOM: I think our policy was to get in on the oil boom as much as possible. It was to make sure that the fragile state system that had been established in the aftermath of independence, which came in the early 1970s, did not break down with squabbles over borders and things like this. It was to attempt to create a stronger American security presence. That was very difficult because we really couldn't make commitments and states in the area were reluctant to accommodate us when they didn't think that we were wholeheartedly involved. So, that was difficult. Our security efforts, for instance, as illustrated by the sale of weapons was hobbled by concerns that we shouldn't sell them too much sophisticated and high tech gear. If we had a military aircraft that we would sell to them, we would try to sell them five, but that was totally unacceptable to them. So, that part of the effort was largely unsuccessful, but we worked away at it. Then we caught the backlash in many of these states by their dissatisfaction with our Middle East peacemaking process. We were fitfully involved in that through that whole period. The goal was to shore up what support we could get in that part of the world for a general peace process policy and to tamp down negative reactions as much as possible. In that, I think we were successful.

Finally, we tried to maintain a watching brief on Iran from the UAE. That meant talking to UAE officials who might know something about Iran and talking to people who were coming out of Iran for one or another reason. We had an imaginative and innovative program of meeting people from Iran, picking them off our consular line, and getting them to talk about their cities and their local situations. What little Foreign Service reporting there was on Iran we did from the UAE. It got generally high marks. It was not like having an embassy on the ground in the capital city where you're in touch with officials, but we

didn't make many mistakes in our reporting and we were able to send Washington a great deal of firsthand impressions. That was good work. Our efforts eventually became a model for similar activities in Istanbul and to some extent in Syria. We bolstered Foreign Service reporting on a country with which we did not have diplomatic relations.

Q: What about Oman? About this time, weren't we working on some major investments in Oman?

RANSOM: I had been directly involved in the military delegation led by Reggie Bartholomew of the PM bureau in State; that went to Oman and negotiated a facilities agreement. We did the same thing in Somalia and in Kenya. This was when I was in DoD. These were some of the most important projects that I was involved in. They came with a great deal of money for the building of facilities and for maintaining pre-positioned supplies. That was about as much as we could get done in light of Congressional attitudes and in light of the atmosphere in the area. In fact, it was quite surprising that we succeeded in getting that much done. These three countries were picked because we thought they would cooperate. I was the one who suggested the names of the countries and I was glad to be able to follow up afterwards by actually participating in the negotiating of the agreements. We had not tried to arrange for such an agreement in the UAE because we thought that we could not get it done there. While I was in the UAE, I worked very hard with one of the emirates, Ras al-Khaimah, to set up a similar program. It caused a fair amount of neuralgia in Abu Dhabi which did not want to see the UAE or any part of it dragged into military and security cooperation arrangement. In the end, the Department decided that the willingness of Ras al-Khaimah to go ahead with the storage facilities was not sufficiently important to risk negative reactions from other members of the UAE and the GCC. So, we never developed those facilities, although I spent a great deal of time on the road going down to Ras al-Khaimah talking to everybody about how to do it, what it would mean, and negotiating, in fact, a very long set of specifics as to what would be stored there and how and how it would be maintained, etc. I spent two years on this project.

Q: Before we move on, how did you find our commercial interests were served there?

RANSOM: We had a good commercial officer with a good office. We worked very hard to introduce American businessmen who were coming to the country to some of the leading families and merchants. American trade was quite large. I guess it is true that I spent much more of my time on political and security issues than on commercial activities, and certainly later in my career, I had reason to rue that decision. But it seemed the right thing to do at the time and it was the best use of my experience at the time. The general commercial goal was to help Americans get in on the oil wealth. The Gulf Arabs, of course, were very interested in the same thing but were not generally successful. In the Middle East, commerce was usually carried out through third parties, often Lebanese or Syrian; they could sometimes be difficult for American companies. The oil business was a fractious business. A bunch of Algerians had come to dominate the Abu Dhabi Oil Company. The management of the business was run through Paris rather than through American oil companies. There were American oil companies working there. We got our share of the pie, I would say.

Q: Were the restrictions on "bribery" that we had legislated a few years earlier an inhibitor?

RANSOM: I think it was almost certainly an inhibitor. But my view, which has grown up over many years of watching this policy at work, is that it was the right thing to do and we had been right in trying to persuade other nations to follow our lead rather than being pressed to mimic other nations.

We certainly lost a lot of contracts when the legislation was passed. As I said, a lot of business was conducted in the Middle East using middlemen and agents from the Levant; they didn't understand or appreciate why our companies were so reluctant to pay a bribe. As far as they were concerned, bribes were part of the price of doing business. The French, Italian, British, German, and Asian companies had no such inhibitions and openly admitted their practices. But if you look at the trade figures, we certainly didn't do badly.

Q: In 1985, where were you assigned?

RANSOM: In 1985, Marjorie and I had completed two years in Abu Dhabi; we were doing quite well. One day, I got a call from Dick Murphy, the assistant secretary for the Near East; he thought that I would be a good DCM in Damascus. He thought that that was a bigger and a more important post than Abu Dhabi. We worked out assignments for Marjorie culminating in her appointment as PAO a year later. She wasn't going to be able to do that for the first year because there was an incumbent, but she would be able to follow his activities and in the meantime, do other things on a regional basis for USIA from Damascus. So, off we went to Syria.

Q: This was from 1985 to when?

RANSOM: From 1985-1988. Syria was a very different world. Essentially, we were going from a place where we had a very, very good relationship with the government, Abu Dhabi, to a place where we did not have a good relationship with the government from a place where the Soviets did not have an embassy to a place where the Soviet embassy was the huge and dominating influence on the political scene. We were going from a place that was very rich and very flourishing to a place where socialism and corruption had stifled all growth and investment. We were going from a place where host government was concerned by the security threat that Iraq and Iran presented to a place which thought that Iran was its best friend, Iraq was something to be traded off, and the great threat was Israel. We coming from a place where Lebanese issues were raised, if at, all in terms of the share of the commercial life that Lebanese businessmen controlled to a country which lived right next door to a raging civil war in Lebanon in which it took sides regularly. This shows again just how different the Middle East is. The Arab world is only a world in the sense that some kind of Arabic is spoken—even if not mutually intelligible; otherwise the interests of the various nations in the area are quite divergent. It is the reason why the talk

about unity has never become more than talk in that part of the world. It is the reason why Arab leaders find it so difficult to act in union.

Syria was unlike Abu Dhabi in many other respects. One was that it was such a fascinating country in terms of its history, archeology, climate, and sociology. We found it endlessly fascinating to travel throughout Syria. The government allowed us to do that. They had a rule that made it necessary for people to get permission if they left the city of Damascus, but in a magnificent sort of Syrian fashion, they never really bothered us if we were going out to just be tourists.

So, since we didn't have a hell of a lot to do with the Syrian government, we had a lot of time on our hands. We traveled on every paved road in Syria, to every site, to every province. Of course, it was hard to find things to do on the weekend. In Abu Dhabi, you went out on boats, you camped in the desert, you did some scuba diving, but in terms of culture and society, there were very severe limits on available attractions. There were no such limits in Syria. We spent a lot of time in the souk looking at the silver jewelry, rugs, and other things. We dodged all the opportunities to get involved in the antiquities trade. But there it was. It was fascinating to look at.

Q: Who was the ambassador while you were there?

RANSOM: The ambassador was a wonderful man by the name of Bill Eagleton — a real pro and one of the men who had more years in the Foreign Service than anyone else. He was a gifted writer and a man with a very light touch. He was most experienced in difficult posts. Syria was by far the easiest post he had ever had. He was a specialist in dealing with perfunctory Arabs and he did wonderfully well in Syria. We liked him very, very mucboth he and his wife. He proved again to be a magnificent model of the best in the Foreign Service. We have had a series of wonderful ambassadors for whom we worked. They all remained close friends and admired models.

Q: How did we view Assad and what were our relations - really with Assad more than Syria per se— because I assume Assad was, as far as we were concerned, Syria.

RANSOM: Assad really was Syria in terms of the way power was wielded in the country and how decisions were made, particularly on foreign policy. He was a fascinating and complicated guy, a little bit reclusive, not someone you could just pop in to see, but we saw a great deal of him and I sat through an awful lot of meetings taking notes while he was meeting with American VIP's. I got a very strong impression of what the man was like.

Assad at that time was embarked on a scheme that has now been reduced to ruin. He has had to abandon it. We told them at the time that this was going to happen, but he persisted in this grandiose notion of rejecting all effort at negotiation until a strategic balance with Israel had been created. That basically meant drawing the Soviet Union in to support Syria, building up Syrian military strength so that they would be able to meet and counter any Israeli military threat. Assad understood power very well. He didn't pay much attention to economics and he didn't seem to understand that his country was in the grips of a downward economic spiral where per capita income was decreasing every year while no new economic dynamics were being created. He did hire as his minister of economics a man who Marjorie and I knew very well, Mohammad Ali Mahdi. Mohammad Ali Mahdi had lived next door to us and I befriended him at some point. He was a thoughtful and very decent man with an American education and an American wife. Mohammad Ali Mahdi's gifted economic background was plunked right into the middle of a tremendous struggle to eliminate budget deficits, efforts to get control of the currency, which was devaluing, end subsidies, open up areas for private investment, and channel money away from operating costs and into investment opportunities. He wanted to do a great deal more but wasn't able to because of the struggle with the Baath Party in particular and with the apparatchiks who were making so much money from state contracts. But we would occasionally have a chance to talk to Assad about some of these issues. We didn't get anywhere. He thought that socialism was bringing benefits to all the people and that nothing needed to be

changed; all was all working well. So, really our main focus was on Lebanon and on Israel and a little bit on some other problems.

Q: How about confrontation with Iran?

RANSOM: The Syrians had a very bad relationship with Iraqis. The border was closed and there was nothing but enmity between the two leaders, Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad. When the Iraqis went to war with Iran, the Syrians cut the pipeline of Iraqi oil coming across Syria, a blow that was very painfully to Iraq. They closed the border and refused supplies and support. The Iranians had agreed to supply Syria with free oil . So, Syria had become a kind of Iranian surrogate against Iraq. That made for some very bitter relationships. It made for some very complicated political questions inside Syria since the whole northern part of the country was traditionally an extension of the Euphrates Valley. Wherever you went in northern Syria, you would see, on shop walls, pictures of the Iraqi national soccer team. That was a subtle way of saying “We don't support this policy of opposition to the beleaguered Iraqi state.”

The border closings had destroyed much Syrian economic activitythe ports and the transit of trucks which carried a great deal of entrepot trade that went across Syria into Iraq. The border closing had considerable negative “bread and butter” effect on the Syrian economy. It was “peace, abril polititiqe,” as Hafez al-Assad once said. The Syrians also had disputes with the Turks, particularly over water rights and over the activities of the PKK (the Kurdish party that was seeking independence, at least autonomy, from Turkey). The Turks believed that the Syrians were supporting it. The fact is that they were. But they were doing it in a typical Syrian fashion. The Syrian view of such activity inside their neighbors' borders was that “We are weak, you are strong, and we will therefore do things that make your life miserable and eventually force you to come to us to ask for our help. Then we will extract our pound of flesh but not give you everything that you want in the way of expulsion, etc. of terrorist elements.” We became involved because we regarded

the PKK as a terrorist group, of which Damascus was filled—Palestinian groups who were eager to take us on as well as take on Israel. The worst of these groups was Abu Nidal.

The Syrian government got directly involved in terrorism while I was in Damascus. They were caught trying to blow up an El-al airplane—a very clever plot that went awry. That led to a British decision to break relationships with Syria. While we did not break relationships, we withdrew the ambassador and cut the mission in one half as an indication of our displeasure. I was left as charg# for over a year in a time of great tension and great difficulty. It was one of the defining periods in my diplomatic life. Marjorie was allowed to stay and run a USIS program. It had traditionally been true that, while despite difficult and strained political relationships, Syria was willing to tolerate and accommodate a large USIS program. It was a substitute for political relationships. Marjorie's work by and large continued normally in this period of difficulty.

The Syrians are perfectly capable of pursuing a dual process if it serves their purposes. In the case of the United States, we may have wanted, on one hand, to punish and on the other hand, to attract. They found it perfectly acceptable to excoriate us in political channels, but to encourage us in cultural and educational channels. Our relationship was also complicated by the fact that while the Soviet Union was the great friend of Syria yet one would have been hard put to find Syrians who liked Soviets— whereas every Syrian family had immigrants to the United States who sent home letters, money, and accounts of life in America that made it natural and desirable for everyone to be a friend of American society. They would try to draw a distinction between our government and our public. It's quite possible. That's what we did as far as their government and society was concerned. It meant that we had a reservoir of goodwill and interest in things American that the government had to recognize as a force in its own country.

I can remember going off to villages to look at archeological sites. We would drive in with our diplomatic plates on the car and someone would say to us, “Welcome. You are a visitor in our village. We're so pleased to see you. We see you are diplomats. You must

be Soviet diplomats." "No, we're not." "Well, are you from East Germany?" "No, we're not." "Oh, is that so? Are you European?" "No, we're not." "Are you American?" "Yes, we are." "We have uncles in Detroit. We'll show you the letter he wrote. He has his own house. My God, he's bought a gas station. Can you stay the night with us? What can you do to help us get a visa?"

The visa question was something that bedeviled us every day. Everybody wanted visas to America. The stories about getting visas were legion. One of the funniest was that one day Hafez al-Assad was driving to his office and saw this big long line in front of the American embassy. He didn't know what that was so he asked his driver. He stopped and got out and went up to the end of the line and said, "What are you here for?" They said, "Oh, Mr. President, we're just here because we're trying to get a temporary visa to the United States. Of course, we want to come back." He kept asking people and he noticed the line was melting away. He got up to the head of the line rather quickly and asked the guard "Why did all these people leave?" He said, "Well, Sir, when they saw you were getting a visa, they decided to stay." Political jokes of that type, of cruel nature, were legendary in Syria. The sense of humor is not buffoonish as it is in Egypt, but it's very wry and lacerated. We collected these jokes and enjoyed it enormously.

Q: Let's deal with the two great relationships there. First the peace process in Israel and then we'll move to Lebanon. Did you play any role in either or was that above your pay grade?

RANSOM: To begin with, the Israeli government was in the hands of Yitzhak Shamir and the Likud Party at the time. There was no peace process, in particular with Syria. There was no peace process on the West Bank. We were still living in the aftermath of the Egyptian agreement. That's all that the Israelis were interested in. The Arabs, because of that Sadat agreement, didn't want to do anything more. So, there wasn't a whole lot to do. Our task, at least as I saw it, was to keep the Syrians informed so that they didn't miscalculate what they were up against. We didn't want them to misunderstand what

the situation was - or to look for small openings here and there that might be usefully exploited. But these activities were just time filling measures.

There was no peace process. But it was in our interest at that time to make it appear that we were constantly looking for openings. George Schultz in particular did not like Hafez al-Assad. He didn't want to come talk to him. He didn't trust him or like him after what had happened in Lebanon. The type of personal relationship that is always so necessary in these situationsi.e. personal relationships with the president of Syria in particular— simply never developed.

I remember well one visit that George Schultz was finally prevailed upon to make. He arrived in Damascus. He got off the airplane. He was dressed like a mafia don. He had on ribbed trousers, a ribbed sport-coat, a dark colored shirt with a white tie, and two toned shoes. He was coming to pay a call on the Mafia “don” and he was dressed for the occasion. George Schultz was a smart, good, tough guy and someone who should always be reckoned with, but there was no meeting of the mind when he and the Syrians went into discussions.

Q: This was after the Schultz Plan was developed, which Bob Paganelli told him wouldn't work. This sort of stopped things cold.

RANSOM: What stopped things cold was that the Israelis weren't interested in entering into new negotiations. They simply felt that the time would come when the Arabs would surrender. In the meantime, they would keep what land they had. They weren't interested in taking any risks at all. The major Israeli interest at that time was in lambasting the Syrians, monitoring the development of a Syrian missile and a chemical weapon, and in extricating Syrian Jews. We were not involved in any of that. The embassy was tasked to give our government warning of any military attacks on Israel. We had a very elaborate system for trying to spot that in advance. We didn't want any more October surprise wars.

Q: Did you drive by the ministry of defense to find out if the lights were on and that sort of thing?

RANSOM: Yes, we had a very long list of indicators, which should have given us warning. On one occasion when there was a partial mobilization, we managed to miss it for several days. We did pick it up eventually. There were occasional air clashes between Syria and Israel. The Syrians always lost airplanes and pilots and the Israelis thought this was a way of keeping the Syrians in their place. It wasn't hard for these things to happen. The planes flew quite close to each other which gave rise to some fire exchanges. There was also an occasional fight between Syrian and Israeli forces inside Lebanon. The Syrians had a fundamental defensive problem. They had attacked on the Golan, gone to the edge of the Heights and looked down into Israel and then had been driven back. Through diplomacy, they had recovered some of that land. But the Israelis were on top of the Golan Heights. The Syrians had to deploy their army across flat-lands to protect Damascus from a possible Israeli attack from the Golan Heights. However, the Israelis had also invaded Lebanon and were about half way into the Bekaa Valley. This actually put them closer to Damascus than they were on the Golan Heights. It put them in a position to drive straight north up the Bekaa and into Syria, cutting the coastline road from the rest of Syria. The Syrians had to defend themselves in the Bekaa Valley as well as being prepared to ward off the Israelis threatening them from the Golan Heights. They really couldn't do it. They didn't have the manpower and they didn't have the equipment. So, they were in difficult straits. They were fighting, in effect, a two front war and they couldn't manage it. The Israelis used this advantage cleverly to keep the Syrians off guard.

The Syrians constantly expected the worst from the Israelis. Part of our job was to try to calm some of the Syrian anxieties. We were able to provide the Syrians with some explanations of Israeli activity when it looked like the Israelis were very threatening and getting ready for major thrusts.. In some limited way, we acted as a go-between for the two countries,; it was a charged and difficult environment in which to work. Our contacts were

almost entirely with three persons. Occasionally, Hafez al-Assad when there were visitors in town. Then the visitors tended to do the talking. There was almost no independent contact with Hafez al-Assad when visitors were not in town. You could get messages through by calling people in his office or through some other indirect ways. But you just didn't call up and ask to see him and hope to get in, particularly if you were the charg#, although the ambassador didn't have any better luck.

We had unlimited access, based on formal requests to the vice premier, Hadam, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We had a lot of contact with the guy who headed the American desk—a very clever, able, and decent man named Saka, with whom I became very close friends. As for the rest of the governmenti.e. ministers whom the Soviets would see on the basis of just a phone call directly to the minister's office— I never saw other ministers; couldn't get to see them. I could go see Mohammad al-Mahdi more or less because he was a friend. The other ministers weren't about to see the American ambassador or charge'. In any case, I was hard put to think of things to say to them, because we didn't have any programs, we didn't have connections, we didn't have trade, we didn't have intelligence exchanges, we didn't have military sales. We had sanctions that we had to enforce. We were the “skunks” at the picnic. Amazingly enough, though, we did have probably more time with these three officials than the Soviets did.

Q: With all this access, did you feel that the Soviets were pulling any strings or were they just the deep pockets into which Syria would reach and take out what it needed?

RANSOM: The Soviets were seen by the government of Syria as the great strategic ally against both us and against Israel. But the two countries had many deep differences particularly on debt issues. The Syrians had an insatiable appetite for Soviet military equipment even though they didn't make very good use of it and they lost a lot of it. They blamed the equipment and the manufacturer rather than the way it was used. So, American equipment in the hands of Israel made us look very powerful and made the Soviets look bad.

During my tour, the Syrians made tremendous efforts to bring in American oil companies. They had succeeded in finding oil where the Soviets had failed. There was an American oil company that was the wholly owned American subsidiary of Shell which was drilling in a very large new field in the eastern part of Syria. I always wanted to see if this success could not be leveraged into the development of gas resources and the increased use of electricity— electrical generation, trade, and such. We worked on that, but we ran headlong into opposition to American investments from the socialists and the ruling party. Nevertheless, I tried my best to work on those projects with American companies who were willing to enter the competition. But the sanctions that we put in place effectively halted to all these efforts, particularly after the Syrian plot to blow up the El Al aircraft.

Nevertheless, when we or other people had the opportunity to see Assad, we always tried to talk about American investments. The Soviets were embarrassed that the Americans had discovered oil when they could not and they were embarrassed by the fact that the Syrians quite clearly were lying to them when they were asked for repayment of the huge military debt —or even part of it. The Syrians would say, “Yes, we have this oil coming in. We'll pay you. Now give us more military equipment on credit” and the Soviets were caught. Did they go ahead with more credits on the basis of promises when they weren't getting repaid anything? They did a get a little bit. The Soviets tried to sell spare parts on a cash basis. The Syrians balked. There was a lot of strain in their relationship. The Soviets felt that occasionally the Syrians would push things to the brink with the Israelis and with us and that in effect they were asked to bear the brunt of defending the Syrians under those circumstances. That was a source of misunderstanding between the two countries. As failure deepened in all the areas of Syrian undertakings - its diplomacy, its economy, and everything else - inevitably, the Soviets' disillusion deepened and frustration on the part of the Syrians with the Soviets increased. What looked like a very powerful and important relationship was actually a very troubled and fragile one. Our difficulties with the Israelis were nothing compared to the Soviet problems with Syria— a situation that I pointed out again and again to my Syrian friends and interlocutors. I pointed out that

we got something from our relationship with Israel while Syria was getting less and less from their Soviet relationship. It was still a time when the Soviets were our great Cold War enemy. I developed a relationship with Soviet ambassadors and with the Soviet DCM in particular which meant that about once every two months we would go someplace private and have a talk. They were wonderful talks. I had come to the conclusion that the Soviets were on the skids and their position was going downhill. My lifelong concern about the Soviet threat was being changed to one of a power in decline. My Soviet counterparts shared some of these concerns, but by no means were prepared to agree in the slightest with my conclusions. Our talks were quite interesting. I used to have a trump card . I would say, “Well, in this part of the world, my friend, you have one great disadvantage. You are friends with Syria and friends of Iraq and we are not. We have one great advantage. We are the friend of Israel and Saudi Arabia and you are not.” When Egypt swung from one camp to the other, it was another strategic blow to them. Those were interesting conversations.

Q: What about dealing with the terrorists who were camped in Syria? This must have been of great concern to us.

RANSOM: We did as much reporting as we could on these organizations. That was difficult since we were denied by our policy to have any contacts with them. One could go to the Soviet embassy and see the representatives of these organizations lined up at the buffet table. I wanted nothing more than to sidle over and strike up a conversation, but I could not. However, Damascus was filled with embassies that were friendly to us and had lots of diplomats with nothing to do - Australians, Canadians, French, British for a while, other Arab states. We found that if we didn't make it too obvious, we could ask questions which these other diplomats would want to answer. They would actually go out and seek out Palestinians and others and come back and tell us what they had heard. So, we were able to do a fair amount of reporting on the organizations.

Also, the Syrians would tell us some things. Syria leaked in all directions. We picked up a great deal of information just from the grapevine. Our CIA station was extraordinarily good. There were people falling out of trees attempting to report to the United States since they disliked their own government so much and the station was extraordinarily good at recruiting and extracting information. I had never seen a better station and never had a better relationship with any station. They really did everything that we wanted the station to do. They were first-class spies. I thought they were magnificent and collected information that we couldn't. I always felt, incidentally, that the station was abetted in Syria because it did not have liaison relationships which stultified penetration effortsas in most other countries.

Q: If you have liaison, this means you can't play games.

RANSOM: I think we could and you should do so, but the Agency won't. It's just a way of checking the Agency, I thought. It was a terrible way of doing it. Anyway, if any one should have a liaison relationships it is the State Department. The station didn't have it in Damascus and it was great. They could do what they were really supposed to do and they did it. We found out a lot about these Palestinian organizations. I remember one time going on a picnic to see a biblical site—a site mentioned in the Bible, a tiny community in a ravine way in the back of Damascus. On the way, we passed by a camp that was occupied by one of the Palestinian terrorist organizations. I forget which one. We knew where these things were. It was a training camp. Lo and behold, we noticed some on-going training on the hills behind the camp using hang-gliders. I thought that was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. I'd seen them running over obstacle courses and everything else, but I didn't quite think of hang-gliders as weapons of war. I mentioned what I had seen to our military attach#. I said, “They're really going sort of batty. They've got hang-gliders out there.” He was a lot smarter than I was. He wanted to report that. I said, “Go ahead. Here is what I saw. There were two of these things and they were trying to launch them off this hillside. I don't know if they killed themselves or not.” This group later tried to launch raids into Israel

with these hang-gliders. They were caught. That was the kind of crazy stuff that they would do.

The relationship between radical Palestinian groups and between Palestinian groups of all sorts and the Syrians was very complicated. The relationship between the Fatah and Syria was very, very bad. In fact, the Syrians at various times arrested Yasser Arafat and did their very damn level best to see him killed. What appeared to be in public a very good relationship, an alliance even, was under the surface a very troubled and complicated affair. I think that it was one more of the presumed Syrian alliances that simply didn't work.

Before I left, I had a conversation with the minister for foreign affairs. I should note that Syria was the only place where I have served where basically I could say anything I wanted as long as I was not insulting. They were polite people. They didn't harass us. They treated us with respect. But they were very, very blunt. I found I could respond in the same very frank way as long as I was polite. The minister of foreign affairs was a man I did not much like - although he saw me and he would see me even as a charg#— the only charg# in town he would see. I told him that their relationship with Iran was not helping. Their antagonism towards Egypt was not helping. The Iraqis were getting stronger while Syria was growing weaker. The economy was going downhill. I went through all of the Syrian policies and said that to the best of my knowledge and belief, all of them were failing, including associations with the radical Palestinian groups that carried out acts of terrorism. I suggested that one way to change the Syrian condition was to trade at least some of these policies for something valuable, which Syria could do to Arab states, to us, and to Europe. My idea was an anathema to him. He said, “We're never going to change our policy. It is based on high principles.” I said, “Well, it's just not working. That's all. My only observation is that these policies are unsuccessful and I think you have alternatives.” He did not agree, but within five years, all of these policies had been abandoned - the alliance with Iran, the veto of the peace process, the antagonism towards Egypt, the rejection of the Palestinian peace efforts, and even the final fact, which at the time I was there, suggested that Syria was not interested in the return of the Golan Heights. Getting

it back was not the issue. The issue was Arab destiny, with Syria as the leader, and defending the Palestinian people against deprivations by the Israelis. Now that's gone. The only thing they really want now out of the peace process is the Golan Heights. They could have had that if they had played their cards right earlier. They would have had a lot to give away. Now they have nothing to give away.

Q: Was the Iran Contra Affair during your watch?

RANSOM: Yes, it was.

Q: How did that happen?

RANSOM: I was caught up in it.

Q: You might explain quickly what it was.

RANSOM: The efforts to negotiate with Iran and to supply them with military equipment as suggested by the Israelis and abetted by them actually took place while I was in the Department of Defense in Washington. It started there.

Q: It blew up about 1985.

RANSOM: Yes, it did. I was in Abu Dhabi at the time. It was to me a horrifying example of policymaking gone bad. Everything was wrong about it.

Q: This was Oliver North.

RANSOM: Oliver North, Howie Teischer, Dick Secord— my former boss at DoD—, and others. All of them were rightly pilloried for what they did. But what happened when I was in Damascus was rather more interesting, at least for me. As is now known, the U.S. was making tremendous efforts to extricate hostages from Iran. We were working very hard with the Syrians to get their help on this.

Q: David, in the 1985-1988 period, how were Lebanon-Syria relations?

RANSOM: During most of the time that I was in Syria, Lebanon was at war with itself. Also, there was a very large Israeli effort to support the Lebanese government in order to get its signature to a separate peace agreement. The Israelis were trying to build up a position of strength in Lebanon at the expense of Syria - or at least the Syrians saw it that way. Therefore, the Syrians were not very willing to do much that would have been helpful to us in Lebanon.

At the end of the day - and we have to jump forward several years to the time of the Gulf War - the Syrians got permission from all the Arab states and acceptance from the United States to play a role to end the fighting in Lebanon. They did so with a brutality and swiftness that was decisive. Lebanon is probably a better place for that. They forced the passage of a new constitution which did take some power— but not much—from the Christians, but restored peace to a land that had been divided and troubled by sectarian fighting. That was always something that the Reagan administration resisted. Its suspicion of Syria was very deep, based on the belief that the Syrians and others had participated somehow in the murder of the Marines in Lebanon and had worked to frustrate U.S. and Israeli efforts in Lebanon. Nevertheless, while there was a large disconnect between ourselves and the Syrians on Lebanon, it was the only issue at that time that I could see which offered the possibility of cooperation between the two countries. In the final analysis, their interests were the same as ours: an independent Lebanon, a peaceful Lebanon, and a Lebanon where peace would reign. The man in charge in Syria of Lebanon affairs, below Assad, was Khalil Hadam. I went to see him several times, usually with visitors, but he was someone that I could see on my own as charg# if I had a message of importance. Hadam was, however, very difficult to talk to—a bullying, blustering personality in full command of all of the facts in his portfolio, eager to show that he was in charge on Lebanese policy; it was difficult to have a dialogue with him. We were, however, pushing the idea of a new constitution for Lebanon and we wanted Syria's support. In fact, drafts were brought from

Washington by April Glaspie and Dick Murphy which we discussed with the Syrians. They never said “No”; they didn't say what they would do, but from that we could draw the idea of an Arab acquiescence. In fact, the Taif settlement when it was reached followed rather closely the type of constitution that we had had in mind. So, I think our guess that there was a possibility of cooperation on Lebanon was in the end right. But the end came very slowly and very bumpily.

Q: And this was after your time?

RANSOM: After my time; that's right.

Q: You said that we had the same goal in mind for an independent Lebanon. I always thought that Syria really had designs on Lebanon to take it over.

RANSOM: That's not true. The Lebanese would disagree with my view— in particular the most embittered part of the Lebanese polity, the Christians, who had to give up their predominance in Lebanon in exchange for something like equivalence. They were not denied power and not put in an inferior position even though their numbers shrank terribly over the course of the Lebanese civil war. They probably don't have more than 25% of the population now. The Syrians were quite happy, however, to see the Christians with approximately 50.5% of the power. They thought in the end they could deal more easily with Christians than they could with other Lebanese power centers—particularly with the Shia group and the Sunni group.

What they really wanted in Lebanon, I think, and I've heard Assad talk about this, is at most some tiny, tiny changes in the border where there were clear differences. This is a matter of yards in a few places. Assad said in meetings that I attended, that essentially the borders were fixed and he had no desire to see them change. What he could not accept was a Lebanon that was used by another power against Syriahe had Israel in mind specifically. It's very simple to understand the strategic reason for this. Syria is basically a weak state that has to be focused on defending Damascus. Almost all of its military

forces are around Damascus and near the Golan, where they have fought with Israel. As I noted earlier, If Israel were able to send its forces up the Bekaa Valley, which is a broad, flat plain, they could actually end up at the border between Syria and Lebanon closer to Damascus than they were from the Golan Heights. What would happen is that the Israelis in Lebanon could turn towards Syria, force it to redeploy its forces, and to face a whole new threat of an Israeli drive up the Bekaa and into Syria, cutting the road between Latakia and Homs, cutting the pipeline, driving towards the cities of Homs and Hama, cutting off the coastline. That was strategically unacceptable. Lebanon had to be a buffer against Israel, not a jumping-off place for Israel to invade Syria. I thought, that was a much more limited goalnot occupying Lebanon, but making sure that no one else did either.

Q: When you were talking to the Syrian official in charge of Lebanon affairs, how would your conversations go? What were you after? What was he after? How did it come out? Were these under instructions?

RANSOM: As I said, I went to Damascus as DCM to work for Ambassador Bill Eagleton who was my good friend and much admired colleague. Eagleton was there about a year when the Secretary and others decided to withdraw him along with about half of the embassy staff as a show of great displeasure on our part for the Syrians efforts to destroy in-flight an El Al airplane. The Syrians had been caught in London trying to do this. The story was widely publicized. The British ended up breaking relations with Syria. We decided for a variety of reasons not to do that. Instead, we went for a halfway measure and then waited to see if the Syrians would break relations with us. They did not. I was left in charge of this skeleton embassy staffed with a lot of military and intelligence people who were looking for signs of mobilization or threats to Israel. I had a very limited brief to use in my talks with the Syrians. I didn't get a whole lot of instructions. I could go see the minister for foreign affairs and Hassad. I couldn't really go see Hafez Al-Assad unless a visitor came. Then I could go. The way to involve myself in that conversation was to give the visitor questions to ask and then occasionally insert myself into the conversation. Assad did not deal with charges', he said, and while he was always extremely polite to me, we did

not have the type of easy and significant relationships that heads of embassies might have in other circumstances.

Neither did Bill Eagleton when he was there. It was much the same situation for him. But when I was there, it was particularly hard because of the jolt that our relations had suffered when we cut back after the discovery of the Syrian plot. So, with that as prelude, I would have to say that I carried on these conversations about Lebanon with the minister for foreign affairs, whom I could see if I had a reason. I could not sort of simply go up and call on him on a friendly basis. I would have to have a message. Then he would receive me. Once again, this was done with great Syrian civility. He could be sharp in what he said, but he always said it in a way that was correct. I could see Haddam pretty much on the same basis.

Beyond that, I have to tell you, there were very few people in the government of Syria whom I could see. Some of the other ministers would see me, but for the most part, I was shunned. I was ostracized as the American representative. After a while, the American government was willing to send Bill Eagleton back. The decisive action took place when the Syrians, after a wonderful visit by former President Carter, decided to throw out the Abu Nidal group. That was the peg on which the U.S. government hung its decision to return Bill Eagleton. It turns out that when you pull an ambassador out as we did from Syria, it is very, very difficult politically for an American administration to return him. I think we were lucky that Bill Eagleton was only out for a year or so. In that year, I was in the unusual position of being charg#, but not a charg# who knew if an ambassador was ever going to come back or another one appointed. On one hand, I had to think about what Bill Eagleton might do. On the other hand, I had to think for myself. It was a time of some tensions and difficulties, but I remember it as a testing time that was very good. I was very proud to serve as charg# for that long.

Syria is a tricky place. We made some mistakes. But by and large, we kept talking to the Syrians. Years later when I went back to Syria and saw people in the ministry of foreign

affairs, they said to me very plainly with their normal Syrian clarity and directness, “We like you very much, Mr. Ransom. We didn't always like what you said, but we knew that we wanted you to keep on talking to us and you always did.” That meant that they had some dialogue with the United States. They could find out some things about what we thought and they could look for some isolated areas of cooperation, although those were precious fewdrugs, Iran, the Gulf, terrorism, commercial activity, Arab League politics, the peace process, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey. On almost all subjects, we were on opposite sides. Their reluctance to break relations in the end probably came down to the fact that they had to keep some sort of relationship with the United States since we offered the only possibility of restraining the Israelis. They had to be able to find out easily what the United States thought on a variety of subjects. That wasn't a lot to build on, but it was something. Oddly enough, I think, it was our relationship with Israel that led the Syrians to keep their diplomatic relationship with us going — quite a contradiction.

Q: What about the American hostages in Lebanon? Did we try to prod the Syrians into doing anything about this?

RANSOM: Yes. That was a very large part of my business. We were looking for every way we could to get the hostages out. That led to one of the most dramatic and difficult moments of my diplomatic career and particularly my diplomatic career in Syria. President Reagan was personally affected by the thought that there were hostages in Lebanon. The Syrians were not willing to provide nearly as much cooperation as the American government wanted. Eventually the American government tried to make a deal though Iran. Bud McFarland and others (Ollie North) were involved in all of thipeople I knew from my days on the National Security Council staff. At one point, I received a message to me through the station chief rather than through the Department of State. It was a message directly from the National Security Advisor, Admiral Poindexter. He had signed it himself. I was enjoined from discussing the matter with the State Department. It was a matter of greatest urgency to the President. Washington thought that effort to free the hostages was nearing success. I was being alerted so I could get Syrian support when the release

would take place. I thought at the time that, while this was a very unusual arrangement and guidance, it was a directive I could only accept. I did not tell the Department of State.

We had very difficult communications with State in any case. There was a secure telephone line, but you could hardly make it work. It was very, very difficult to get through. I couldn't send a message. I simply sat there and waited for something to happen. Then I got a continuing series of messages in the Agency's channel which alerted me to the developments. I talked to various intelligence people. When a hostage was going to be released, I was instructed to go to the ministry of foreign affairs to tell them that a hostage was coming out. I did that. The Syrians were dumbfounded. They were very nonplussed. In any case, no hostage arrived. It was shortly after that that the Syrians blew the whole story by press leaks to the Lebanese press.

Schultz in Washington blew up at a congressional hearing and denounced the activity. When he did so, he ordered that John Kelly, our ambassador in Lebanon, and I immediately return to Washington. I was summoned out of a dinner party in Damascus and told to get on the plane the next morning. I managed to get on that flight and came back to Washington with a series of stops.

There I found a full-scale investigation and a huge political furor. I should mention that before I went to the ministry of foreign affairs and contacted the government of Syria, I had called back to the department of State and told them I was doing this at the instructions of the NSC. I told the deputy country director, “I can't really in good conscience go to another government with a message unless the Secretary in the Department of State is informed. So, while this seems to me to be in violation of the instructions I have received, I am telling you.”

I was kept in Washington for four or five days, grilled by all kinds of different people - was this a violation of my responsibilities, what were the instructions, what had I said, what had I done, what had others said and done? It was a very unhappy time for me. I was

worried that I had failed my bosses. But eventually I was told, “Go back to Damascus immediately. Leave this afternoon.” I said to them, “You brought me here under the most trying circumstances. I'm going to spend the weekend in Baltimore with my brother, go see a football game, have a lot of beer, and then I will go back. Don't tell me to go back soon!” Eventually the mess all worked out. When I got back to Syria, there was a huge amount of suspicion that awaited me, stories about what my real role had been, what had really gone on, etc. The Syrians did not like to be upstaged by Americans where the Iranians were concerned, where the Lebanese were concerned, where Hezbollah was concerned. They thought that whole thing made them look very bad and they resented it.

Anyway, our relationships with the Syrian government were terribly bad - except for the issues that I have previously mentioned and for and the reasons I've told you. Our work went on as before. But it was a harrowing time for me.

Q: John Kelly had a worse time, didn't he?

RANSOM: I think John Kelly had a worse time because he was much more deeply involved in the arrangements for the NSC people visiting Lebanon and was much more involved in the hostage negotiations and process. He actually hired a lawyer in Washington. John Kelly, never one for much false sentiment, asked me if I would talk to his lawyers. They showed up. I found myself being grilled by people who appeared to me would have been delighted to put me in a bad light if it put their client in a good light. I broke those conversations off. I had not much contact with John Kelly after that. In fact, I came to dislike him intensely later on. But at the time, we were both in the same predicament.

There was an occasion when I may have done a great deal to help John Kelly. At one point when he was in the ambassadorial residence up in the mountains, there was fighting in the area and shells began to fall around the residence. Kelly went into his bomb shelter and the earth shook and explosions were quite close at hand. Somehow, he got a call

off to the department of State. The department called me. I immediately called the Syrian minister of foreign affairs and asked for an appointment. I told everybody I could talk to in the ministry that the shelling had to stop, or else the American ambassador could be killed. The shelling did stop. I was actually told by somebody in the ministry of foreign affairs that Syria had looked into the matter, which probably meant that it was guns under Syrian control that were being fired.

In any case, I called John Kelly and I got him in the bunker and talked to him. I said that I hoped and thought that I had been able to help from Damascus. That didn't make him any happier in the end, even though the firing stopped. He felt that this was confirmation that he was a Syrian target and that they had actively tried to kill him. The shelling was not the only incident that persuaded him of this view. At one point earlier, his convoy had been fired upon and he dug a shell out of the car. I believe he carried it with him (I was told he did.) as proof and a memento of the determination of the Syrians to do him harm.

I was not one of the State Department Arabists who thought that Assad was the answer to a lot of problems rather than the cause of all the problems. I had no illusions about what the Syrian state was doing to undermine us along with the Soviets around the region. In fact, I think Kelly painted me in the end as one of the Arabists whose association with the Syrians had tainted his judgment. When Kelly came to NEA as assistant secretary in 1989 and found me there, he very quickly made sure that I left the bureau, along with Rocky Suddarth, David Newton, Larry Polk and a number of others. I guess my first meeting with John Kelly in Washington after we were both recalled set the stage for later difficulties that proved to me that he was not a good colleague and not a nice man.

Q: What about Hezbollah? Was that going at that time?

RANSOM: There were two Shia organizations: Hezbollah, which was heavily dominated by the Iranians and the Amal, which was dominated by more moderate figures like Nabib Berri (whom I was able to see the night he came to Damascus). This was a little tricky

because, again, John Kelly didn't like it when someone in Syria could see Lebanese political figures whom he had difficulty seeing, But I felt that was the one thing I could do; so I saw Walid Jumblatt, Nabib Berri, and a number of others when they came to Damascus. I reported these conversations in the way that you would expect a Foreign Service officer to do. But I never dealt with any Hezbollah members. The Syrians were going over-board in support of Hezbollah, bringing in large Iranian airplanes filled with guns, trainees, and other war materiel; they shipped the people and the materiel across the border. We documented all of that.

Q: I would have thought that given the Syrian goal to keep the Israelis from coming in and threatening their flanks as well as coming over the Golan Heights, there wasn't much in it for them to help arm what essentially was an irritant. It's like handing a kid a stick to poke the tiger.

RANSOM: I don't know if the Syrians saw it that way. They saw Hezbollah as a side show to be used to distract and divert the Israelis without having to take direct responsibility for it and therefore without drawing direct Israeli responses. They also felt that they wanted not to show their hand in the Bekaa for as long as possible. They were there in great strength and in blocking positions, but they didn't want to confront the Israelis directly and get involved in a war of attrition with them. They thought that the Israelis had the upper hand in the air and that they could not afford again to be drawn into an air battle, especially over Syrian territory since they would be defeated again as they had been before. There was one particularly damaging day when the Syrians lost dozens of airplanes in the air to Israeli fighters. It was like a turkey shoot. They resolved never to get involved in that type of aerial combat again. The Syrians wanted to limit the fighting, if any was necessary, to the ground, involving others, playing a supporting role while denying that any involvement; that was the perfect Syrian goal.

You have to remember that Syria is basically a weak state - at least they think of themselves as a weak state. Therefore, they look to proceed by indirection wherever

possible. Only at the last minute might they take their gloves off and plunge into the fray themselves, but only when they absolutely have to. They did the same thing with terrorist groups. They would let them operate and train openly in Damascus, but they denied that they gave any support to the actual terrorist operations.

Q: Did you feel the Syrians were taking note, however, of the American reaction to Libya - the bombing of Libya due to a bomb that was set off in a club frequented by servicemen in Berlin and the Lockerbie thing?

RANSOM: The Lockerbie explosion came much later. But the bombing of Libya took place while I was in Damascus; it gave me another very harrowing day as charg#. I was awakened in the middle of the night by a member of the embassy bringing a FLASH message that we had begun bombing in Libya. It was quite clear what the reason was. My first reaction at that time in the middle of the night was to call people in and start burning files because I assumed that the Syrians would allow attacks on the embassy the next day. But it was a difficult step to take in the middle of the night. It was a large issue. How many files do you burn? How much equipment do you destroy?

When I found out about the size of the raid (It wasn't just a single plane. It was a very heavy bombing raid.) and when I heard the pretense that we offered, I made one of those decisions that you have to live with afterwards. I'm only glad it turned out to be right. I assumed that the Syrians would be intimidated and would do nothing. So, instead of calling people to the embassy in the middle of the night, I decided to get everybody to the embassy very early in the morning to try to secure the embassy and people at that time to the maximum extent possible. I went to the foreign ministry and demanded extra protection and then we called all the people in town we could think of to tell them that we had done this. One of the things that you can do in a place like Syria where you don't have good official communications is let it be known to lots of other people with whom you have contact that the Americans were doing such and such. At least that pins the responsibility

and generates lots of phone calls, “What are you going to do?” and “How are you going to protect them?” etc.

But the day was a very long one. We locked up the gas tanks in the embassy. We drove the vehicles off the compound. We reduced the staffing in the embassy to a corporal's guard. All the Marines were inside in battle uniform. I was there. We sent up lookouts on houses that we occupied so that we could see things coming. We set up communications with each other. We used radios openly. We didn't mind if the Syrians heard. I had to decide what we would do if the embassy was attacked. Since I was in the embassy, that was no small consideration. The challenge was that there was no way out of that embassy. Anybody who broke in the first floor and set a fire would drive us to the top floors, where we would be incinerated. Anybody who broke in the first floor could take people hostage. I thought that either one of those two considerations justified the use of lethal force. This situation raised a very interesting issue, which is that the charg# was the person who had to make decisions of life and death. There is nothing in the manual, nothing in the training of State Department officers, nothing that has ever been done to examine this issue, even after Tehran, where Ann Swift opened the doors to the Iranians. You're on your own. Most Foreign Service officers would say, “If you shoot, you enrage the crowd and you lessen the likelihood that you'll get protection from the host government,” but my conclusion was precisely the opposite. If you shoot people breaking into an embassy when it's clear that that is what you have to do to protect life and property, you are in a better position to demand protection from the government; hopefully you also intimidate the crowd and force it to reconsider what it's doing. I was sure that would be true in Damascus because any Syrian crowd would not be an inflamed mob, but would be under the control and direction of the Syrian intelligence services. So, with this game plan - and again, I found it a harrowing set of circumstances - I was in the embassy with the RSO (Regional Security Officer) and the Marines and a few communications personnel (everybody else was scattered around town) when the demonstration started. The radios began to bring us word that it was moving up the street towards the embassy. I called the

ministry of foreign affairs to tell them what was happening. I called the head of diplomatic security, a General Guree, and demanded more protection. It was with great relief that I saw a large company of Syrian riot police begin to deploy around the embassy with shields, weapons, cars, water tanks. It was a show of force. The crowd nevertheless continued to march towards the embassy, but were finally stopped by considerable riot force. So, we were protected. None of those difficult decisions that I had made about what to do in the case of an invasion of the embassy had to be put into effect. Later when I tried to interest people in the department of State in the events in Damascus- and this is a case study - suggesting that our experience was not in an isolated case— the same situation had been faced before in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere and would come up again,—there was no interest whatsoever in an analysis. It was too sensitive, too controversial; in any case I am not sure most people in the department of State would have agreed with the decisions that I took that day. But the alternatives of death or hostages seemed to me to dictate the answer. All I can say to repeat again is that I'm glad that our contingency plans weren't tested that day.

Q: David, Jimmy Carter and Syria. When did this happen?

RANSOM: It was 1987. I had been there for quite a few months by myself as charg# after the administration pulled the ambassador out and cut the embassy by one half following, as I mentioned earlier, the discovery of a plot by Syrian air force intelligence to destroy an El Al airplane leaving out of London. The Syrians nursed lots of grievances against the Israelis and apparently conceived this as an act of retaliation. It was by and large well planned, but it went awry in a very strange way. A Syrian operative went to London and managed by staying in a good hotel to seduce the chambermaid, a very simple Irish woman. He took her out and treated her very well and promised to marry her. His story was that he was an Israeli Arab and that he lived in Israel; he was going tell his family about the marriage. The Irish lass was to go to Israel before him; she would be met by his family and he would follow right after her. So, he took her to the airport. On the way to the airport, he gave her a pocket calculator. He even made the special effort of saying,

“Oh, look, your pocket calculator is on. The batteries would have run down.” Just before he put her on the plane, he turned it off. Turning it off started the timer for the explosives that were in the bag packed in the sides of the bag in flat sheets. She was to carry it on the plane and he thought it would blow up in the overhead cargo compartment and bring the plane down someplace over the Mediterranean. But Israeli security noticed on the manifest this unmarried Irish woman who was going to Israel for the first time with no business or other reason to be there and singled her out for special questioning. They couldn't find anything wrong with the bag or with her and she stuck to her story. As the time of the departure of the plane came closer and closer, they continued to investigate and eventually when taking her bag apart, found the explosives and pulled her off the plane. They then notified the British. The British went after the Syrians. The Syrian operative went to the Syrian embassy. From there, he was taken on a Syrian Air bus to the airport and there the British caught him. So, they had both the unwitting dupe, a very bitter young Irish woman who was being sent to her death by someone she thought was in love with her and the guileful agent of her downfall. There was a trial and the British ended up by breaking relations.

But as I noted earlier we did not. Therein hangs the story. It was not clear to me at the time whether our decision not to break relations would be mirrored by the Syrians, who had every reason for angry rejection of these accusations. Since this happened in Britain, the British under Maggie Thatcher very forcefully rallied all of the EU against Syria. The EU applied various sanctions, particularly on travel by Syrians of all sorts, but also on business, investment, and aid. That spread to the Far East. The pain was quite serious. We were denouncing them, of course, for this act of terrorism. But we had in fact very little actually to do with the investigation or anything else. Since we already had our own sanctions in place, it was the EU sanctions that were new and very painful. But in any case, it was decided in Washington that we would not break relations with Syria.

Q: My instant reaction is, we were trying to work on Syria to eventually come to peace with Israel? We would be taking away one of our cards if we did this.

RANSOM: Yes, but, in fact, there were no talks whatsoever between the Israelis and the Syrians at that time and no prospects of talks. We reported that. The Syrians had made the decision. The talks between Syria and Israel were futile when the balance of power was tipped so heavily in the Israelis' favor; the Syrians were openly espousing a course of building up their military strength with Soviet assistance until they could deal with the Israelis as an equal. They were also lined up with the Iranians. They were opposed to the Egyptians. In practically every area of operations, we had nothing that we could call grounds for cooperation with Syria. But there were some other reasons which probably were weighed in Washington—or at least should have. One was that we provided eyes and ears on the ground in Syria and could hopefully give some warning of any surprise attackto avoid a repetition of the Syrian success in mounting a surprise attack in 1973. Having an American embassy in Damascus could spot mobilization, troop movements, pick up stories, etc.; that was no small consideration. The Syrians could have been spoilers in the Middle East. We needed them to understand what we were doing, how determined we were so that they wouldn't miscalculate and wander into adventures that might create worse problems.

Also there was the terrorism brief on which we worked very hard— picking up information, stories, and making demarches. It wasn't clear to me that we were ever going to get anywhere with that brief. Still, it was a watching brief and it was important to maintain our position, I thought. If we simply abandoned the field, we would be unable to do anything. So, those were, I think, the main arguments for maintaining a relationship. What the Israelis thought about it I don't know, but I would assume that there would have been consultations between the Americans and the Israelis on an issue of such sensitivity. The word out of Israel even under Shamir, who was a Syrian hater, was not to lose contact with the Syrians. In any case, we made our decision. The British went much farther than we

did. They were much more the aggrieved party, of course, because the crime had been committed in their country. We stayed.

I then cast around by myself for whether there was any hope of mending our relationship with Syria, to keep up the discussion on terrorist groups and to look for some area for improvement. At the time the American sanctions were augmented, there was a considerable American investment by a company called Pectin in the oil sector. In fact, Pectin, a Houston-based company, had discovered oil in Syria after the Soviets had looked for years. They had gotten an old fashioned concession out of the Syrians and gone to work on it. The president of the company had dealt directly with Hafez el-Assad on this matter. It represented a considerable act of compromise on the part of the Syrians with their bloody socialist principles to allow American private companies to look for oil. When they found the oil in sizable amounts—amounts that promised to run up to production of 400,000 barrels a day— the Syrians were enriched and pleased. There was some discussion in Washington of putting sanctions on this American company. I pointed out that it was a hopeless proposition. The American company was wholly owned by Royal Dutch Shell. In fact, Pectin in Latin means “shell.” What would happen if we forbade American companies from working on this oil in Syria would be that Shell would simply take over the company; it then would become a non-American company, and everything would go on exactly as it had before with oil production running up to 400,000 barrels a day but no benefits at all accruing to the United States

Q: How about EU sanctions?

RANSOM: EU sanctions were not going to stretch to oil. That was one of the decisions that was taken, but otherwise the Washington sanction fever won out. Both Pectin and another American company, Marathon, had prospected in Syria and had found a great deal of natural gas. They were both upset by the sanctions regime. The head of Pectin, however, was a very thoughtful and very enterprising guy. He thought that something had to be done whether or not it benefited his company. Pectin was a small part of the Royal

Dutch Shell empire and not a very big oil company on its own, but he wasn't about to see it lose this gem in its crown without a fight. So, he suggested that a high level emissary be sent to talk to Assad about terrorism and particularly about Abu Nidal and to insist that there were some steps that had to be taken against Syrian air force intelligence. I inferred this after the fact since such matters weren't shared by the bureau or whoever it was in the department of State who worked this out.

Q: Could you explain Jimmy Carter's position at this point?

RANSOM: He was a private citizen, although an ex-president. He was not the most likely candidate for the administration then in power to select and send. But he announced that he was coming without saying why. He just wanted to see his old friend, Hafez El-Assad. The Syrians were deeply suspicious. They insisted that I tell them why he was coming. Of course, I could not. I didn't know. I didn't find out until he came and told me. I became responsible for making the arrangements for his visit, which I was very happy to do. Jimmy Carter was a man whom I admired enormously for his Camp David efforts. Since I was charged with making the arrangements for Carter's visit, I went about doing this very punctiliously. We didn't have a whole hell of a lot to do in Syria in those days. Demarches were few and far between and always very insulting and difficult. But I had had my share of time with Assad as well as with the other movers and shakers in the Syrian regime simply because I was the American charge' and we had occasional American visitors. I would go with them. The Syrians were suspicious, but they didn't want to say “No” to Carter; they agreed that he would come. I called Carter and talked to him in Georgia and he said he wanted to go up to Assad's birthplace, a little village called Qurdaha in the hills above the Mediterranean coast in the northern part of Syria. I informed the Syrians that's what he wanted to do. They were even more suspicious now. “Why?” I said, “You'll have to ask him when he comes. This is what he wants to do. If you don't want him to do it, I'll inform him, but I don't see anything wrong with it.” Carter arrived. There was a proper Syrian protocol delegation at the airport to meet him as well as me. I took him to the hotel. I had arranged for him to meet people in the embassy just so they could see him

and he could greet them. He began to unfold what he thought he was going to do in Syria, which was to press Assad on the question of Abu Nidal and the role of Syrian air force intelligence. In his mind, the international community had to be sure that some steps would be taken by the Syrian government against these two groups. I said he couldn't have come at a better time and he couldn't be a better person, but I had no idea if his mission would have success. Still, we were off to Qurdaha the next day. President Assad had provided his own plane for the visit. We went off and it was a fascinating trip. We flew into an airport near the village. A huge convoy of cars, fire trucks, and ambulances, with police, and dignitaries aboard was there to follow us up the mountain road to the village. We went to the tiny house where Assad had been born. His brother, Jamil Assad, met us and gave us tea. I translated. There was a very agreeable conversation. At one point after Jamil had shown us the closet in this tiny house where Assad had been born (There were not extra rooms in this house, so his mother had used this closet as a place for the birthing of her children and for a little bit of privacy.). Jimmy Carter looked around the room. Everyone fell silent. He turned his gaze on Jamil and said, “I wanted to come here because I was a young man in a very small town from a poor background who left his home with the thought of helping his country, got a military education and a military background and eventually became the president. I felt if I came here I would add to the sympathy and the understanding that I have for my friend, Hafez el-Assad. I wanted to start my trip to Syria with a visit to Qurdaha.” I suddenly saw in a flash what his strategy was—to gain the sympathy and interest of Hafez el-Assad. I must tell you, I was deeply impressed. So was Jamil Assad. Jimmy Carter had been talking about how in the aftermath of his presidency, he cast about for things to do and had ended up for a while making furniture in the basement of his house in Plains, Georgia. Jamil said, “We make furniture right here.” He went over to the side of the room and he pulled up a very rickety cane rush chair and he gave it to Jimmy Carter. I have that cane rush chair in the kitchen of my house here in Washington. Carter, for good reason, didn't want to take it back with him when he left on the airplane. But it was a symbol of a very personal kind of diplomacy that in my mind was extraordinarily successful. Carter spent hours drawing me out on Syria. I dare say I

was at that time the best informed man on Syria anywhere in the world. I didn't have an awful lot of people to talk to either, so I was happy to discuss the issues. He was skeptical about intelligence reports about Syrian terrorist activity. He wanted that confirmed. While I could give him accurate reports, it was clear that he was still not completely convinced that everything he had been told in Washington was true. This changed in a rather dramatic fashion. One morning very early, around 5:00 am, I went down to talk with him. It was a cold February morning. It was still dark. But the Syrians had brought out television cameras for a jogging expedition around the streets of Damascus. It was just Mr. Carter and me who were going out jogging. We had jogging clothes on. He said, “Okay, David, which way do we go?” I said, “First we'll go up the hill past the guesthouse, over the top of Damascus and then down through the city and back on the main drag. Don't worry, this time of day, there is no traffic at all. We have escort police who will take care of any problems that we might have.” So, off we went. On the way up the hill, which is quite steep behind the Sheraton Hotel, he started out again by saying, “Let's talk about the economy of Syria.” So, all the way up that hill, huffing and puffing, I talked about oil, water, electricity, remittances, tourism, and socialist industry and such. I finally got up to the top and I could hardly breathe. He said, “Now let's talk again about the Baath Party” and off we went. I had sort of a plan. Since I was choosing the course, it was going to take us right in front of the official headquarters of Abu Nidal. It so happened that the conversation worked its way around to terrorist organizations just as we were nearing this building. As we got in front of it, he asked me again in his most skeptical way whether I really thought that these organizations were here. In the middle of the street with cars all backing up behind us, I stopped and said, “Look there, Mr. President. See that sign? That is the Abu Nidal office in Damascus. See what's in front of it? A Syrian police guard box with a Syrian policeman in it. That tells you what you need to know.” There was a long silence. He looked at me and off we went again and back to the hotel. He did not take me along on the visit with Assad. It was a private visit, he said, and I acquiesced, of course. You don't argue with former presidents. But by that time, I had gained a very considerable fondness, affection, and respect for Jimmy Carter. He was capable of telling outrageously funny stories. While

he looked to Rosalyn for confirmation and for help at almost every turn, when it finally came to tell one of his stories, he said, “Rosalyn isn't going to like this, but I'm going to tell it anyway.”

Q: Was she there?

RANSOM: Yes, she was with him this time, occasionally intervening with suggestions that were in some cases quite forceful. He always took her views into consideration. One of the stories he told, which I found at the time impossibly funny because it was impossibly unlikely that he would tell the story, was about a friend of his who had tried to quit smoking. He said it was very difficult. But eventually he said he did. He said, “I asked my friend, the good old boy from down in Georgia, if he ever forgot about the taste of a cigarette. He said there had been a time when he didn't think about it. Normally, he thought about it all the time and it was only an act of steel willpower that got him through the day.” He said that he and his wife were out fishing. It was a hot summer day. They were in their boat. He said they were out by themselves in the middle of a big lake. He said that it was so hot that he said to his wife, “Honey, I hope you don't mind if I just take off my clothes.” She shrugged, so he did. He removed his clothes. A little later on, he tried to reach for his bait box. The boat tipped. He fell forward and caught his penis in the oarlock. He said, “I forgot about smoking.” Anyway, we got along famously.When he came out of Assad's office, he said he had had a very good conversation; we'd have to see what the results would be. For several months, there were no results. When I was home on leave, I was stunned to read a cable from Damascus announcing that Abu Nidal had been thrown out of Syria and that the head of Syrian intelligence had been sanctioned and removed from his office. So Assad didn't follow Carter' suggestions right away. He waited for a decent period of time after Carter left so that it would be disassociated with that trip. But I think clearly this was an extraordinary act of personal diplomacy carried out with great imagination and great determination and it was very, very successful. It was those two acts that led to the return of the American ambassador and eventually the easing of

sanctions— our new sanctions— and the restoration of a full embassy staffing. That was an extraordinary little vignette in my life in Syria, one that I am always very fond of relating.

Q: Tell me, on this terrorist attempt on the El-Al plane, in looking at this after the facts came out, was it your feeling that Assad called all the shots or that it had the acquiescence of Assad? How did you feel that fit in? It doesn't work very well. Anybody who looks at this understands that this sort of thing really backfires. Look at what happened to Libya.

RANSOM: Syria has a long record of involvement in terrorism and it's something that is a natural outgrowth of its own weakness and irresponsibility. They work through proxies in many situations because unlike us, they can't step up to the line and say, “I'm pushing you. Push back, if you dare.” So, in Lebanon and elsewhere, faced with a technologically and militarily superior combatant, they had used terrorism routinely. There was no reason to think it wasn't a deliberate policy or for that matter it was a policy that didn't work or didn't seem to pay off. As to the narrower question of whether Assad himself authorized the attempted blow up of the El Al plane, any action of significance, particularly something that would deal with relationships with the United, Israel, or Europe, would not have been done without Assad's knowledge. I can certainly imagine intelligence operations being mounted, planned, prepared, etc. without his involvement in the details. But as for the need for presidential approval in a system like Syria's, I think it's very unlikely it would not have been sought. Renegade operations or wildcard operations didn't really exist.

Assad was not a particularly bloody-minded man. It was not that he liked to shed blood for its own sake, but he, unlike Saddam Hussein, who seems to really take a personal satisfaction in hurting people, was tolerant of it when it seems necessary. But he certainly allowed his own population to be mistreated when they “misbehaved”. The torture, the brutality of his security forces, leaves me in no doubt that he would have acquiesced in the effort to bring down an airplane if it had seemed necessary to them. So, we don't know the answer. We can only speculate. But if you ask me what I said at the time, it was, yes, probably so, but we'll never know.

Q: It's interesting. If it had succeeded and the Syrians had been implicated, the Israelis probably would have wiped out downtown Damascus. This was bigger than anything that had been done to them. It would have given the Israelis the moral superiority to really do a number on Syria.

RANSOM: The Israelis had intercepted Syrian airplanes over the Golan Heights and shot them down. The Israelis had intercepted a plane flying back from Syria with the number one man in the Baath Party on it, forced it down in Tel Aviv, humiliated the man and said at the time that there were terrorists on board the aircraft. They eventually released this guy, Abdullah Rahman, and let him go back to Syria, but only after a lot of laughing. The Syrians had discovered intelligence operations mounted by the Israelis against them. The Syrians had put up for a long time with the overflights of Israeli planes, small drones, which they didn't shoot down. So, they had what they considered to be grievances. The idea that it might fail, while real, was less daunting than the appeal of the possibility that an operation like this might succeed and therefore take Israeli arrogance down a notch. Again, I don't know that this was the way they thought about it, but certainly, the provocations in their mind existed and the desire for some sort of revenge existed. It looked like it was going to be a good operation. As far as I can see, it came within a whisper of working.

Q: You left Damascus in 1988. Bill Eagleton had come back.

RANSOM: Bill Eagleton had come back, something that pleased me enormously because I liked and respected him so much. He is still a very good and close friend of mine—he and his wife both. But after the dramatic Carter visit, Bill Eagleton came back to Damascus. We had a very warm reception for him in the residence. It was probably one of the best moments of his life when he walked in and saw the embassy staff standing, applauding, shouting, and stamping its feet. I was very happy to return to being the deputy. Then Bill decided to resign. His successor was Ed Djerejian. He chose another DCM, so I left. I returned to Washington to work for Assistant Secretary Dick Murphy. It turned out

that Dick Murphy also resigned soon thereafter (It was an election year.) and so I left that job. I ended up not with my great friend and hero, Dick Murphy, as a boss, but with John Kelly, who succeeded Murphy.

Q: What was your job when you came back?

RANSOM: I came back to be country director of the Arabian Peninsula.

Q: How long did you do that?

RANSOM: It turned out to be two years, partly with Murphy and partly with Kelly—much less time with John than with Dick. It was a very good job. The Arabian Peninsula directorate had eight countries and seven embassies. We had no embassy in south Yemen. But that meant that you had seven ambassadors, seven embassies, seven sets of issues, seven sets of visitors, etc. It was a very busy job. It was also one that involved a lot of important issues, particularly with Saudi Arabia, with a lot of high level attention. It gave me the chance to catch up with my old friend, Prince Bandar Bin Sultan al-Saud. That was great fun. I liked the job very much.

Q: You got there in 1988. Where was the Iran-Iraq War at that point?

RANSOM: It was winding down. The Iraqis, for a variety of reasons, began to very, very slowly gain superiority over the Iranians. At the end, through a combination of our intelligence, help, and simple Iranian losses, they faced the Iranians with the threat of a complete defeat. The Iranians eventually sued for peace—"a bitter cup," as Khomeini put it. They had no choice. The issue then became - and this was an issue that involved me - whether the cooperation we had established with Iraq during the fighting could be extended into something larger in peacetime. I had had something to do with the so-called tilt toward Iraq when I was in DoD years earlier. It was viewed as a piece of heresy at the time, but it became the direction the U.S. government took with larger and larger steps later on. I felt that it was important to try to engage the Iraqis. Moreover, I thought

it was possible. That was wrong— a mistake. In the late 1980s, while I had nothing to do directly with this policy, it certainly reflected the views of a lot of the states of the Arabian Peninsula; namely that it was something we should try to do. I've often thought that leaving the bureau when I did allowed me to escape some of the calumny that others gote.g. John Kelly for attempting to do something that was basically sensible but probably doomed to failure because of Saddam Hussein's character.

Q: I've heard from people who were serving in that area that they were getting reports from the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, that they knew Saddam Hussein and that he wasn't going to do what he actually did. So, it wasn't as though we were naive Americans being led down the garden path. All of the Arab states went down the same path.

RANSOM: Yes, that's right. It's important to note that the Middle East is not just a place that battles outsiders. It battles insiders. Arabs are wrong about each other at least as much if not more, than we are wrong about Arabs. The “rational-man” syndrome that always afflicts us because of our politics and the society in which we live, simply cannot be applied to the Middle East. You must come at it from a very different perspectiveusually from the most personal and self serving perspective. Many Middle Eastern leaders are personally self serving and very often indifferent to violence, indifferent to the truth, indifferent to their actions on the impact on their society. We just don't understand men like this. When we saw Saddam Hussein, he was smiling and reasonable. He seemed to cut to the point. He seemed to make deals and keep them. But the record was very clear about what kind of a person he really was— a killer at one point. He went out at night, knocked on the door, and killed a man who opened it. We like to think that people changethat they grow, can be engaged, but that is not always true in that part of the world. I think it's one of the impediments that makes it very difficult for us to predict events. Some of the outcomes are counterintuitive as far as we are concerned. I made my share of mistakes. I thought that engaging Iraq was the right policy. I thought the people who complained about that

policy were wrongheaded and unreasonable. In fact, it turned out that in this case it was I who was wrongheaded and unreasonable.

Q: Was Iraq part of your domain?

RANSOM: No, it was not.

Q: You picked up Kuwait though?

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: While you were in charge, during the 1988-1990 period, was there any concern about Kuwait?

RANSOM: There was a lot of concern about Kuwait. At the time, Kuwait wasn't a very good friend of the United States. They were constantly acting as a great friend of the Arabs, a great friend of the Palestinians, and a critic of the United States. As the Iran-Iraq War deepened, the Kuwaitis foolishly decided that they had a larger hand to play; they were convinced that they had an international guarantee which would preserve their independence and security. They began to do things that seriously provoked the Iraqis, although they didn't do anything that could have justified the Iraqi invasion of their country. On border issues, oil issues, refugee issues, and others, they misjudged even more than we did the temper and character of Saddam Hussein and the threat that he posed to the region.

At the same time that they were taking anti-Iraqi positions, they also managed to pick fights with the Saudis. There aren't many Arabs who liked the Kuwaitis. That was particularly apparent in this period. But it was not the kind of thing that you could engage the Kuwaitis, even at John Kelly's rank. It would have been difficult to talk to the Kuwaitis about these things and we did not. I think it is fair to say that we ignored the warning

signs before the war burst out; even when the Iraqis began to mobilize and move against Kuwait, we didn't believe those signs either.

Q: What about Saudi Arabia? Were things on a fairly even keel with Saudi Arabia or were they somewhat distant from us during this period?

RANSOM: We had the usual fights over arms sales. That was a pretty simple matter. The Israelis and their friends in Congress would complain bitterly about arms sales until we would give another $100 million to the Israelis. Then they would decide, “Well, this time we can let this go forward.” We were being held hostage in that sense. The fight was always described to be one of arming the enemies of Israel in a way that endangered Israel, but while there was an element of truth to that, it was just a very, very small element. The Saudis posed no threat whatsoever to Israel. It was basically U.S. politics that made arms sales to Saudi Arabia very difficult. The Saudis are very good friends of ours, probably our best friends in the Middle East, but an awful lot of people were impatient with the Saudis. They could be maddeningly slow in making decisions. They could be opaque. They weren't willing to join us publicly in support of the peace processeven such as it was. They didn't have the heart in many cases to stand up to Arab radical states. Their own society at home was not interested in what was happening beyond their borders. They were very rich; the oil price was an issue that deeply pained Americans. Carter in particular was forced into a series of almost humiliating pleas to the Saudis to help with the price of oil. That was one of the reasons why the Saudi portfolio was not easy to manage. There were congressional issues, public affairs issues, defense issues, intelligence issues. There were lots of things going on. While it was a big set of issues, it was hard to find any Saudis willing to discuss them with us. They could be very standoffish. Nevertheless, I think it's still a first-class portfolio.

Q: You were there when the Bush administration replaced the Reagan administration. Outside of the fact that your great friend, John Kelly, came in, did you sense any difference in attitude of the new Bush administration towards your area, basically the Arab world?

RANSOM: Yes, very definitely. Mr. James Baker was bound and determined to take all of the control and all of the authority to his office on the seventh floor of the State Department. He succeeded largely in doing that. He was surrounded by a small group of very able people. . He wanted, I think, to weaken the regional bureaus and he wanted particularly to weaken the Near East Bureau; he succeeded in doing that as well. In the end, I came to admire Jim Baker a great deal ; later on I worked with him on Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece— areas where I got a lot of support from him and clear directions.

I did notice a change in the Near East bureau when he assumed office. The Near East bureau [NEA] had always been a “crisis” bureau. It had acquired a reputation over the years for acting with very great independence and decisiveness. Some saw this as a reflection of collaboration among the “Arabists” which I think included a perceived indifference to the political realities either in Congress or in the White House.

I think there was a lot more to it than that. Because of the challenges in that part of the world, it attracted people who were usually competent. The bureau had the reputation among people who watched the paperwork in the department of state as being the flagship bureau. I heard that again and again from people who weren't in NEA. NEA got its work done faster than anybody else. More importantly, they were always there with suggestions and ideas. They carried things out very effectively. There was very close cooperation between embassies and the home office. There was a tremendous #lan that attracted people; NEA had a real esprit d'corps. That was attacked by John Kelly. I think over the years since then the bureau's attitude has been dismantled, ended. Maybe from the point of view of critics, that is a plus, but for me personally, I saw it as a loss. John Kelly was a difficult man to get along with, but I really thought I was serving him loyally. I had expected to spend a third year in ARP, but in October I found that he didn't want me in the bureau at all. I was quite taken aback.

I had to go out to “walk the halls” to find a job — with no backing at all from NEA. I was very lucky. I found a wonderful job in the European bureau as head of the Southern

Europe office. I stayed there three years and had the time of my life. I was lucky to stumble into that. NSE is sort of the orphan office in EUR. None of the real Europeanists thought of Greeks or Turks as being really Europeans; the bureau just wanted somebody who wouldn't make mistakes, but who also would not trouble them with these questions or requests for guidance.

Q: I have some interesting interviews discussing the time when Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus were put into the European Bureau in 1974, just before all hell broke out. It was just like putting a skunk on the bishop's breakfast plate.

RANSOM: Europe never had a crisis. Since 1945, it never had a war.

Q: Greece and Turkey were so-called NATO partners, but EUR didn't know how to deal with them. They had to rely on people they didn't know.

RANSOM: That's right. I found it wonderful. I'll never forget the day when Ray Seitz - a tall, spare, elegant, distinguished man who later became our ambassador to the Court of St. James, the first and only career officer to do so- called me in after I had been in SE for several months. He said, “I've been watching your papers and your work and listening to people talk about what you're doing. You're doing a very good job. I like that. I want you to understand something. I spent my whole career trying not to step in Greek and Turkish shit. If you want to do Greece and Turkey, take on that yourself— okay? Just don't ask me to get involved.” So, I was able to function almost as a deputy assistant secretary on matters of concern to SE. In fact more than a DAS. I was able to function as Seitz had asked. He never had to get involved. There never were problems that needed his intervention. We were able to keep all these different balls in the air at the same time. I chaired interagency meetings on Greece, Turkey and Cyprus and went on trips and ran the whole show and I loved it.

Q: I want to go back to the time when you were still in Arabian Affairs. 1989 was the big year when the Berlin Wall came down. The Soviet Union didn't fall apart for two and a half

more years, but basically the Soviet Union was sort of removed as a factor. Did that create a feeling of opportunity, relief, or concern among you who were dealing with Arab affairs?

RANSOM: You have to remember that the place we nearly went to war with the Soviets was again and again the Middle East. That is where a nuclear confrontation looked like it might come most quickly—the flashpoint. As the Soviet Union weakened and its support of radical Arab states weakened, I felt a growing sense of relief and delight. I had gotten into this business years before when I saw the Berlin Wall being erected. I was in college at the time. I wondered what I could do to help my country. I wasn't at all sure that we had the discipline, the strength, even the appeal to confront a communist state. I was always one who felt that while we couldn't tailor everything we did in the Middle East to the Soviet threat, it had to be seen as the major reason for an American presence. The Soviets could not be allowed to get at Gulf oil and they could not be allowed to dominate the area. We had to make friends and create coalitions in order to stop the Soviets. That was the whole rationale of my career.

When the Wall came down, I was sitting in my office, watching on TV people walking back and forth through Checkpoint Charlie without police standing there. I went upstairs and simply walked into the deputy assistant secretary's office; he was the acting assistant secretary. I asked him if he knew what was going on. He did not. I said, “You have to see this, John.” I turned on the TV set and there it was. I remember him saying, “It's a wonder the Seventh Floor (i.e., the Department's top management) pays any attention to us at all in NEA.” That was an interesting reaction.

The fact is that the great struggle that had been at the core of my identity as a public servant was clearly coming to an end and it was coming to an end on our terms. Watching that play out with Bush and Baker doing a masterful job of orchestrating the West was the best thing that could have happened to me in a career in the Foreign Service. I will go to my grave thinking that in my own small way, I had something to do with that — that I contributed to the Soviet failure and to our success. It is the reason for public service and

the reason why I am still so proud of what I did in the Foreign Service over those many years.

Q: You're now back in Washington working for the Bureau of European Affairs?

RANSOM: No, I went back to Washington to work in the Near Eastern Bureau, at the request of Assistant Secretary Dick Murphy, to be the man in charge of the Office of Arabian Peninsula Affairs. An election was held in the U.S. Dick Murphy was allowed to retire from the Foreign Service. Another Foreign Service Officer, John Kelly, was appointed to replace him. He had no background whatsoever in Near Eastern affairs but had some sort of charge to clear out Arabists who he thought pursued independent and undesirable courses of action.

Q: I want to get the dates. You came back when?

RANSOM: 1988. So, my time in Near Eastern Affairs was brief and very disagreeable. There must be three people in my career in the Foreign Service whom I have found it difficult to get along with. John Kelly was one of them.

He is at the head of a lot of peoples' lists, particularly from the Near Eastern Bureau. At first, I was baffled. I wanted to do everything I could to help him. I wanted to be a team player. As I mentioned earlier, I had had some dealings with him when I was in Syria and he was our ambassador in Lebanon. I thought that might have gotten us off to a good start, but in fact, it seemed to me that everything I did was denounced and rejected. I was at a loss as to how to proceed. Nevertheless, I was unprepared for the denouement, when I was simply to be told not to apply for any more jobs in NEA. I was told that in October when my tour of duty normally would have ended in November. The assignment process was already well advanced, so I had suddenly no place to go in the department of state.

Q: Before we get to that stage, did you find that other officers of your comparable experience and rank were having the same problems?

RANSOM: When Kelly came in, he very dramatically fired all of the DASs (Deputy Assistant Secretaries) and appointed new people. He brought in Jock Covey who was a person of considerable bureaucratic skills, but with no qualities of leadership and a surpassing falseness. I, April Glaspie, Rocky Suddarth, David Newton, and some others were pushed out of the bureau for one reason or another. Kelly's famous temper, his tremendous insecurity, his lack of knowledge about the area, his uncertainty about his own standing with the new administration — the Bush administration — should not obscure the fact that I think he had been brought in as somebody who was going to clean out the bureau.

Q: Who brought him in?

RANSOM: Larry Eagleburger, the Deputy Secretary of State. Eagleburger was responding to Secretary Baker's charge that the geographic bureaus were much too strong. In the State Department that Baker ran, everything would be coordinated and done from the seventh floor. In addition, there was no doubt that people who were identified with one side of the Arab-Israeli dispute would not be given any prominent positions. I did not think I was identified in that category, but I was also told to leave the bureau. I had been on the anti-Assad side of all the arguments in the bureau about how to deal with Syria. I was a card-carrying Arabist. I had served in the Arab world, but I was not an anti-Israeli person at all. But that didn't make any difference. There wasn't much I could do. I could simply never get through to Kelly. My various efforts to do things never worked out.

In addition, at that time I suffered from a very serious problem with my back. I had to take two months out for an operation and recuperation. It was a very serious disk problem. Leading up to that, there was a prolonged period of considerable pain and discomfort. I think I was disadvantaged throughout that whole period by this physical condition. I must say that despite the disappointment of being told to leave the bureau, things worked out. I must tell you that I never regretted leaving the bureau even though I was not directly involved in its efforts in the great Gulf war, which began after I left. However, as the man in

the European Bureau who was responsible for Turkey, I had a large part of the action all to myself. I had probably a larger role in that area than I ever would have had if I had stayed in NEA.

Q: So in November/December you were moved over to EU in dealing with Greece, Turkey and Cyprus..

RANSOM: I got that job by “walking the halls”, talking to people. The European bureau had lined up one of its own candidates, a very good guy, to go be head of the Southern Europe Office. He had a good record of prior service in EU, so that eventually he was picked to go to work for Under Secretary Reggie Bartholomew. So, suddenly, the bureau had nobody to head SE. They wanted an operator. I had “Operator” stamped all over me. I went through the usual process of application, interviews and such, and was selected, but it was partly because in the European bureau, they always thought that Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus really belonged in NEA and partly because they didn't have their own good candidate available and partly because I had a few friends in the European bureau who were able to say, “Oh, I know he gets things done.” I worried that John Kelly would blackball me because he had been an EUR man, but he apparently never took any interest in that. So, off I went to EUR. I had a simply wonderful tour of duty.

Q: You were there from when to when?

RANSOM: It would have been from 1990 to 1993 — all of the Gulf war. The invasion came immediately after I left NEA. I volunteered to work weekends and nights on the task force just to help out, which I did throughout the war as a supernumerary. That was a fascinating time. We had wonderful ambassadors in all three countries and I worked very, very closely with them. Mort Abramowitz in particular in Turkey and Mike Sotirhos in Greece were men who were very determined, very smart, and very close to me. The bureau was more than willing to let this phase be run out of SE as long as there were no problems, and there never were. So, my office was involved in some very important war-related issues. I really

spoke as an assistant secretary might on these particular issues, such as the increased stationing of American troops, increasing assistance, changing longtime restrictions on the operations of U.S. forces, shoring up intelligence relationships, on and on and on. I traveled to Turkey and Greece. I was on the phone daily and sometimes many times a day with not just the embassies in these countries but also involved offices in Washington — DoD and elsewhere. There was a tremendous surge of activity. I must tell you that I look upon the way the war was conducted with great pride as a shining moment in American diplomatic history, something that we did for our own good, for the good of the world, and for our friends in the Gulf. I thought it became a model for actions in the post-Cold War era. It was a magnificent period.

Q: Let's talk about Greece first. Was Papandreou in charge?

RANSOM: No, he had left and there was a conservative prime minister. Mike Sotirhos was a political appointee who was not highly regarded by many in the European bureau, but I found him to be a man of enormous resourcefulness and venture. I thought that it was a great time to undo many of the things that had been put in place during Papandreou's era of anti-Americanism. In fact, we did that.

Q: When this happened, did the Greek government and the Greek media support what we were doing? There has been this latent anti-Americanism of the Greeks. We like the Turks, too.

RANSOM: We had superb relationships with the government, but not such good relationships with the press. Mike Sotirhos' developed a policy of not dealing with the Greek press, never talking to them and not giving them any information. That was seen in many corridors of the U.S. embassy and in the Greek press as making his problem worse, but he always maintained that to give them anything would be a mistake and he would rather read ignorant accusations than informed ones. So, yes, we always had a problem with the press, but we didn't pay much attention to it.

Q: During the Gulf War, did Greece play any role?

RANSOM: The fact is that we got the Greeks to take a whole series of steps which would have been unimaginable in an earlier period. For instance, on one of my visits to DoD, I discovered that they were positioning a carrier off the Libyan coast to protect the air bridge that was going from Europe over the Mediterranean over Egypt into Saudi Arabia. I thought that they sure as hell had a better use for that carrier than in protecting those rocks. But they had to fly south of the island of Crete. They had to fly around Greece. The Greek government had not been giving overflight clearances for years to NATO and American planes. I went back to DoD, called Mike Sotirhos, and said, “Look, this is outrageous. We need that carrier in the Gulf and we don't need to have a fight with the Libyans. What we need is another 200 miles of airspace between us and Libya. We need blanket overflight clearance. We need to go from no clearances to blanket clearance. Any time of the day or night, any plane. Just notification.”

Mike Sotirhos, once he was wound up and pointed in the right direction, would go off with a terrific whoosh. While he was a Greek-American, he was very patriotic and the thought that American forces were being hindered by his Greek friends made him very angry. He went directly to the prime minister and said, “This is simply outrageous. We are going to war. You are an ally and you're hurting us. We can't live with that.” The long and the short of it was that Mike Sotirhos with a lot of help from American military officers who were talking to their counterparts in the Greek forces and with a lot of messages from Washington that I wrote and sent out for him to deliver with great panache, resulted in a change that was nothing short of remarkable. There was almost complete acquiescence on all sides. The blanket clearance was granted. The routes of aircraft were changed. The carrier was moved. Greece was in on our side. With that, we embarked on a series of other steps having to do with tankers, landing aircraft, mobilizing units, and intelligence operations. In every case, the Greeks came through magnificently and helped us. By the end of the war, they were very eager to be seen as part of the coalition against Saddam.

Frankly, that in itself was remarkable. They had always tended to side with the more radical states in the Middle East and particularly with Iraq because Iraq was anti-Turkish. They needed Syria and Iraq to use wherever it was possible against Turkey. So, they reversed themselves on that major foreign policy goal.

As you can see, we had a considerable agenda with Greece. It was not nearly as large as the agenda we had with Turkey. Turkey played a much bigger role; it was a much more important state. But Greece did its part and did it magnificently.

Q: Did the Greek military forces (navy, air force, ground troops) get involved?

RANSOM: We didn't ask them because we didn't want to complicate the role of NATO troops played by bringing in the Greek-Turkish rivalry. I think that the Greeks eventually did make a contributionprimarily a symbolic one. They didn't play any role in the fighting, but they helped. In any case, we had no complaint about what the Greeks did. They cooperated in every way when requested.

Q: You mentioned that we had a carrier to protect our flank for a while. Was Libya considered to be an ally of Iraq at that time?

RANSOM: Yes. In any case, it was a rogue state and neither we or they knew what they were going to do; we couldn't afford to have an incident. We had had too much hostility with the Libyans to trust them very much. Libya was one of the states that initially supported Saddam Hussein.

Q: Let's turn to Turkey. What was the initial reaction of Turkey when Iraq invaded Kuwait? That was on the first of August 1990.

RANSOM: For Turkey, Iraq was a very important state. First of all, years before when the Syrians had cut the oil pipeline going from Iraq to the Mediterranean—a pipeline that is still not functioning today—the Turks had agreed to have another one built which would

bypass Syria and cross Turkey. That provided Turkey quite a bit of oil revenue from transit fees and it provided oil at very reasonable rates.

In addition, they counted on the Iraqis to help them against the Kurds. They didn't get a lot of help, but they got some. They were fighting a battle against the Kurds that was getting bloodier and bloodier; they had every reason to fear that if they didn't placate the Iraqis, their support for the Kurds would grow exponentially. They saw the Iraqis as a counterbalance in the region to the Iranians. The Turks were very worried about the appeal the Iranians had for the Shia and for other Turks. Iraq was a very big market. Moreover, it was the way the Turkish trucks went down into the Gulf. They couldn't cross Syria.

Q: Why not?

RANSOM: The Syrians made it impossible to drive across Syria. But the Iraqis allowed hundreds, indeed thousands, of Turkish trucks to drive down into Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia laden with goods. Adana became a port that depended very heavily on this Turkish trade with the Gulf states. In addition, that trade employed many Kurds. To knock the last remaining prop out from underneath the economy in the southeast was not something the Turks wanted to do.

They were not sure what we were going to do. They didn't want to line up too closely with us. They didn't know what the Europeans were going to do, what the Congress was going to do, what the Arabs were going to do. It was a time of considerable indecision and uncertainty. I had been on the desk for two weeks someone asked me, “If we ask the Turks to close the Iraqi oil pipeline, accept American forces, and join the coalition, will they do it?” I said, “I need a little while and I'll figure it out.” The fact is, I didn't have the foggiest idea. With two weeks on the job and no background in the country, I didn't know what to do. I sat in my office in the State Department and I called every former ambassador. I called most of the ex-DCMs. I called former station chiefs. I took careful notes of what they

had to say. I called historians in American universities. I called my predecessors in SE. I got a long list of pros and cons, along with many guesses as to how the Turks might react. I still couldn't make up my mind. One day, I went out and walked around the department of state twice by myself. In the course of that circumambulating, I decided they would join our coalition. I wrote a memo of eight and a half pages listing all the pros and the cons, almost in a tabular form, and concluded that notwithstanding the cons, the Turks would join us.

Dennis Ross, then the director of the Policy Planning Staff, called me up and said, “The secretary is going to Turkey. I have recommended that he take you along. I've read this memo and I'm impressed by it. Are you sure it's going to work?” I said, “Yes,” which was a lie. He said, “It better work because Jim Baker doesn't like to be surprised or misinformed.” I went on that trip with John Kelly. John Kelly was a man who had every reason to think that he knew a lot more about Turkey than I did. John Kelly never intervened. When the time came to talk to the secretary about Turkey, Kelly let me state my case. Maybe he thought he was giving me enough rope to hang myself. There was nothing but bad blood between us. But he drew a bureaucratic line and he did not cross it. We walked in to see the minister of foreign affairs, me three steps behind the secretary. At that time, Mort Abramowitz had no idea what the Turks were going to do. He told Baker, “We won't find out until we get to the meeting.” Baker said, “My staff tells me they'll agree.” Mort said, “Well, I hope so, but I'm not sure.” We walked into the meeting and sat down. The Turkish foreign minister, a scholarly professor, looked at us and said, “If America is in a war, Turkey is with America.” That was it. In the end, in my memo, I had said “that if we are going to go to this extent and we wanted their support badly enough and made that clear to the Turks, that would outweigh everything else.” So, I had hit the nail on the head. I've always thought of that moment in my career as one of both terrible good luck on one hand, but also of weighing carefully all of the evidence, close consultation with the experts, and a certain knowledge of foreign affairs that comes just from being in the Foreign Service for 20-30 years.

Q: Was there a theme that ran through when you were talking to the experts? One can always come up with all the reasons not to do something. All bureaucracies know that. But the reach is almost something beyond. It's a spirit, a thrust, saying, at a certain point, you almost honor other things, disregard all this stuff, and here is where they go. Were you picking out that theme?

RANSOM: The Turks had all kinds of grievances against the United States. Those things tended to be prominent in the memories of people who had worked closely with Turkeye.g. Cyprus, Greek-Turkish relations, dealings with the Soviets on gas, military aid in Congress, human rights, Europe, etc. I think that the people who were close to Turkey were colored in their views by stiff-necked Turkish obstinacy and irritation on all these points. They also had views that were formed in the context of the Cold War, but we were in a post-Cold War period. That meant that Turkey didn't have the leverage it had in NATO which they had used so effectively for two generations in the post-World War II period, to get what they wanted from us and from Europe. They were worried about being marginalized. They could see that very clearly. Turks, particularly in foreign affairs, are exceedingly insightful with a legacy of statecraft going back to imperial times. They sensed very clearly the changing Turkish position and they didn't want to be left out there on their own when the Soviet Union went away.

They were also caught in a lot of real dilemmas. None of the things that they had banked on in the Middle East were going to make much sense if Saddam Hussein took over one country after another and proceeded to build an unconventional weapons system. Then Turkey might no longer be the strong, powerful Turkey, which had always felt secure in its borders; it might suddenly be vulnerable to attack by an Arab neighbor. They didn't like the looks of that. So, there were all kinds of things in the picture that were new. The prime minister at the time was Ozal, who had been very surprising. He even surprised the Turks, I think, about himself. He wanted to cast the Turkish role very differently in the future years. He succeeded brilliantly.

He also revolutionized the economy and the attitude toward trade and industry. We made the right bet. Baker was terribly, terribly pleased by developments. The Turks didn't do everything that we wanted, but they did close the oil pipeline and they did allow American troops into the country. What they did not do - and on this point the Turkish chief of staff resigned rather than do it (a very dramatic move on his part) - was to send Turkish troops to Saudi Arabia. That was a big mistake on their part. When the time came for the convocation of the victors after the war, the Turks were not there even though they had shouldered as big a burden as anybody and contributed as much as anybody. They had miscalculated. They should have sent a token force to fight with the U.S. Marines on the right flank going into Kuwait.

Q: You said the chief of staff of the Turkish army resigned. Why?

RANSOM: There was considerable sentiment in the cabinet to participate with the U.S. and other allies, but the Turkish chief of staff opposed sending Turkish troops to participate in a war outside of Turkey. He felt that Ozal was pushing Turkey in a dangerous direction which he didn't want to take. That effectively held up that decision, I think.

Q: American airplanes were using air bases in Turkey very effectively?

RANSOM: Very effectively. We built up a very considerable force there. An MOU (memorandum of understanding) had to be negotiated because those forces were not there under a NATO mission. We included in that MOA a whole new basis for military cooperation and for a treaty. It was done by the embassy. Mort Abramowitz and Marc Grossman were simply brilliant in all of this. Once they were turned loose, they were prodigious. They were an extraordinary example of an American embassy at the very best, working all angles, meeting everybody, dealing with the press, talking to the leadership of the country, talking with different political parties, and getting their way. I was on the Washington at the end of this period. Abramowitz must have called me three times a day sometimes. He would call me on Sunday and we would work out what he would

do and what he would say and what I could do and say in Washington. It was a really extraordinary link. I was not the only person he called in Washington, that's for sure. He was a very well connected and very well respected ambassador. He later said that he thought that a great deal of the embassy's success in this period was due to the actions and advice that EUR/SE took in Washington..

Q: Was the Kurdish problem a background to all our activities in Turkey? I'm talking about the Kurdish problem both in Turkey and in Iraq. Was this something that we were having to watch very carefully and balance to figure out what we wanted to do?

RANSOM: It was quite clear to me that if we got the Turks to do what we wanted them to do against Iraq, we were going to have to go along with what the Turks wanted to do with the Kurds. That was a tradeoff. You couldn't call it a quid pro quo because it was never put quite that way, but it was there. We did indeed do that and I crafted all the talking points and wrote all the Washington statements that sealed the bargain on our end. While European states might have raged against Turkey for what they did in the southeast, using military force against their Kurdish citizens, we did not. It was quite clear that there was a bargain there.

Q: Were there any times when this implicit bargain was under strain?

RANSOM: It impinged on the sale of military equipment. It impinged on our human rights reports. It impinged on the discussions that Turks had with Europe and the support we could give them there. It was a considerable burden on Turkish armed forces because they were so heavily committed to their anti-Kurdish activities. We certainly encouraged them to look at other solution beyond the military one as a way of solving those problems; we gave support to the cultural rights of Kurds and maintained our contacts with the Kurdish dissidents as best we could. But our larger aim was quite clear to everyone. We protected that at every turn. We were never going to get into the situation the French

were in, for instance, with Danielle Mitterrand leading the Kurdish fight against Turkey and damming Turkey for what it did.

Q: Danielle Mitterrand being the wife of the French president.

RANSOM: Yes. We had a fairly bloody-minded but obvious policy on our part.

Q: It wasn't as though this Iraqi Gulf War happened instantly. It took more than six months to start. In that time, I would have thought that there would have been considerable thought given in Washington for the development of a an independent Kurdistan.

RANSOM: There was a great deal of concern about this possibility in Turkey and particularly in the Turkish military. We simply were not as concerned about it. We were focused on going to war and the possibility that Iraq would fall into pieces with the Kurds gaining an independent state to the north was not high on our list of concerns. We did spent a lot of time arguing with the Turks about this. I can remember telling them that they were actually better off than they had been before vis a vis the Kurds because we were going to support their forays into northern Iraq. At least, we would not condemn them. We were telling Kurds that if they wanted food and other help from us, they had to get along with Turkey and they could not talk about independence.

We were extremely anti-PKK as part of our counter-terrorism concerns. That was the Kurdish movement that led the fight against the Turkish state in southeast Turkey. I think it is fair to say that throughout this period we never quite satisfied the Turks on the Kurdish question. There were lots of Turkish politicians as well as military men who were very worried about what we were doing to weaken Iraq because of the possibility that an independent Kurdish state would emerge. There was a lot of suspicion in these circles that we were actually going to foster independence among the Kurds as a way of somehow balancing Turkey, inserting ourselves in the area in the post-war period. None of that was true. The pro-Kurdish groups in the United States were very weak — a few guys like Peter Galbraith (a senior staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee) who, as far as I

was concerned, was really a horse's behind who was very pro-Kurdish and pro-Kurdish independence. But that was never really anything the U.S. government was interested in. No one was interested in that.

Q: How about as an aftermath to the Gulf War when Saddam Hussein was defeated and he turned his armed forces loose on the Kurds and we ended up by carving out a hunk of Iraqi territory to protect the Kurds and then used Turkey as a means of feeding and supporting this. How did that come about?

RANSOM: I was involved in that, but I must say, this was an area where I miscalled the situation very badly. I wasn't alone, but I think that at the end of the war, I felt that Iraqi armed forces were more likely to turn against Saddam Hussein than do his bidding. But in fact, the revolt both in the Shia south and in the Kurdish north left little choice to the Sunni army leaders, whose troops were primarily in the middle of Iraq, except to back Saddam against the dissidents. That is because they felt, probably rightly, that if the dissidents succeeded, Sunnis would be at their mercy. Not only would they lose all the power and the wealth they had taken away from these two groups, but they would be hounded in a most terrible way. The Iraqi military also were smarting from their defeat by the Americans and others. Attacking the Kurds and Shia was the only way to regain some of their “manhood”.

In any case, that is what happened. We suddenly found that the post-war period overwhelmed us very quickly and we faced very suddenly and abruptly a huge exodus from the north where the Kurds were being pushed out by Iraqi forces, sending them streaming towards the Turkish border. When the embassy finally got a good handle on what was happening in this remote part of the world, nobody at first believed it The numbers were too huge. There were hundreds of thousands of refugees. A notable Turkish group said, “We are never going to let them into Turkey. We are going to stop them at the border. If they die on the other side, that is not our problem.” So, we were faced with a disaster - a public relations disaster, a humanitarian disaster, and a breakdown of the coalition. Baker decided he had to go to Turkey. Again, I went along

and we made all the arrangements for him to go to the border area. That meant we flew a plane into Ankara. Then we took a C-130 to Diyarbakir. Then we took helicopters that were brought from the Sixth Fleet carriers and flown in through Incirlik Air Base. We flew to a mountain outpost of the Turkish army. From there, we took Land Rovers up the mountainside to the Turkey-Iraq border There were tens of thousands of Kurds, women and children and old men, sitting on the rocks with no place to go. They couldn't go back and they couldn't go forwards. They had no food. Winter was coming. They had no shelter. It was raining. It was a terrible sight. They all felt that we had to do something to help them. It was not exactly clear to me what the hell we could do. I must tell you that I was daunted by the scope of this. I saw for the first time the kind of influence that Margaret Tutwiler could have on the secretary. She was very, very upset by what she was witnessing and insisted that we assist these people who obviously needed help very badly. She was very moved by the sight. We were called to a meeting to develop something like a set of orders for actions to assist the refugees. In my view, what had to be done was to provide humanitarian assistance through civilian organizations. That was going to take a while to crank up. It would be costly. Jim Baker then left us; I found later that he called Dick Cheney, the secretary of defense, and said, “I've never asked you for anything in quite this way. I want you to take the lead in mounting operations to aid the refugees and I want it done right away.” Cheney said, “I'll do it.” So, even before we got back to the embassy where we were planning to send cables and talk to people to activate a civilian operation, the U.S. military was en route with bags of food and other assistance via aircraft. While the operation was clumsy at first and ill-coordinated and difficult and the Turks didn't understand what the hell we were doing, it worked. But as a consequence of supplying food inside Iraq, the military insisted on the establishment of a no-fly zone and a no-move zone in the northern part of Iraq because they weren't going to put their helicopters at risk of being shot down. That is how we got the no-fly zone for the northern part of Iraq. It was not a calculated effort. It was simply a protective and defensive device by our side to allow them a safe military emergency operations; the zone remained even after the end of the emergency relief efforts. It survived in part because nobody could quite

figure out how to end it without appearing to give a victory to Saddam Hussein. Besides, we didn't see any reason to allow the Iraqis go back into northern Iraq with all the possible consequences. We now have this autonomous zone in the northern part of Iraq which has bedeviled our relationship with Turkey ever since.

Q: Somebody else on that trip has said, as you have, that it was because Baker went to Turkey to see whawas going on. There is nothing like seeing a disaster and recognizing that something had to be done.

RANSOM: That is exactly right. He could have read a headline in a Washington newspaper, but there is no substitute for seeing something with your own eyes being confronted by it. He had invested his own prestige in the outcome of the Gulf War and he was not about to let the Kurdish problem besmirch an American success story. What he saw was clearly a daunting sight. As we walked across that mountain top, the Turks had already earlier in the day tied to organize the Kurds, but that was not an easy task. Basically, they had gotten them to sit on the side of a large slope. Baker was to address the refugees there briefly and they were to present him with a petition. He had to do something up there; that was the format. The Turks didn't have any malice of forethought in all of this and were just trying to organize the visit. They also were very concerned about keeping Baker safe. Some of the Kurds were armed and a lot of them were filled with grievances.

We walked across a stony field. At one point, I stumbled over what turned out to be a cement pillar. That was to be the border marker between Turkey and Iraq. It said so in both Latin letters and Arabic on two sides of this small concrete pillar. I thought, “Well, I'd better tell the secretary just so he knows.” I went running across this rocky slope. We were climbing across rocks wearing suits, to get to places. We were surrounded by bodyguards, who were probably much more frightened than we were. I caught up with Baker and said, “Look, you just need to know that you just crossed into Iraq without a visa. The border is right back there and there is a pillar marking it.” He said, “Is CNN around?”

I said, “Yes, they're right over there with cameras. I didn't want them to photograph you without knowing it.” Baker said, “Bring them here.” He got himself photographed inside Iraq without a visa talking to Kurds and saying “We will help you.” That was the deciding moment, I think.

Q: The personal element in diplomacy comes through very loud and clear in some of this.

RANSOM: I think clearly that what we did in the north was better than what we did in the south.

Q: You were involved in this assistance activity and were a professional diplomat. I have a long interview with Chas Freeman, who comes down very hard on the fact that there was no game plan at the end. To me, this is a major diplomatic gaff. How did this hit you? You were dealing with this. You were there. Did we have an end game in mind and if not, why not?

RANSOM: As far as Turkey and Greece were concerned, there was an end game which had been well worked out, but we found that we had to salvage it from the debacle of the Kurdish refugees. But in NEA, there was no end game. This is another black mark on John Kelly because he didn't anticipate the diplomatic-political aftermath of a conflict. But the fact is that Schwarzkopf went to that tent in Salameia without any instructions whatsoever. He had to make up our demands as he went along in the negotiations. He probably made a mistake on his demands for helicopter flights, but the other requirements were not mistakes. It was just that the larger picture was not taken into consideration. We need to remember that people were exhausted by this time. Fighting the war had taken them from the peaks of anxiety and tension through long nights of wondering how it was going to end to moments of mad elation when it looked like the Iraqis were not fighting back and were not going to be able to resist. The recovery of Kuwait and the entry of American troops with a cheering crowd seemed to be proper culmination of it all. We should have required Saddam himself to come down and sign an agreement that did most of what was

later enacted in the UN Security Council resolutions. We should have demanded more of the Iraqi military. But we didn't. I know that some years later when I was in Bahrain, Dick Cheney came on a private business trip. I had him to the house for dinner. There were a number of men in Bahrain at that time who had worked with him during the war. We had a small, quiet, long dinner in which he started talking about the war and particularly the end of the war. Basically, he said, “I don't think we would have done it differently even if we had had better anticipation of what was going to happen. We had done what we had come to do; other problems would have to be solved by other people at other times. We couldn't have gone all the way to Baghdad. We couldn't have administered Iraq ourselves. We just have to live with the consequences.”

Q: There was a question of whether we should have cut combat off so quickly. Otherwise we might have been able to disarm a sizeable part of the revolutionary guard.

RANSOM: That's true, but that also would have meant that the Shia revolt in the south would have succeeded, along with the Kurdish revolt in the north and Iraq would have been destroyed. I think clearly one of the hopes in people's minds in Washington at the time was that a strong Iraqi military was the way to keep Iraq intact while ousting Saddam. We were half right in that. It didn't get Saddam out, but it did keep Iraq intact.

Q: And, of course, Iran was a concern.

RANSOM: Iran was a concern. There was also a feeling that the war had turned into a slaughter. The pictures of the massacre—the destruction of a convoy leaving Kuwait- had a huge impact in Washington. We weren't in combat for the satisfaction of killing people. We were in it for certain specific ends and when had achieved those ends, what was the point of going on with the killing?

Q: What was the relationships with Turkey after the end of the war?

RANSOM: There was a major question about what our policy towards Turkey should be and what kind of a role Turkey would have in the new emerging world. We undertook a major study in the U.S. government. It was huge. It involved all departments and went on for weeks. I had the great satisfaction of framing the questions, running the study, and writing some of the crucial papers myself. The conclusion was that if Turkey was not devoured by its domestic problems (the Kurds, the democratic failings, the economy, the military-civilian tensions, the fundamentalists and Alawis and other groups who were railing at each other), then it stood a very good chance of becoming a dominant regional power— economically, diplomatically, politically.

The fascinating thing was that when we sat down and looked at the map and looked at Turkey's neighbors, it became obvious that it certainly was no longer endangered by the Soviet Union— a model of an overwhelming power against which it could do nothing but rely on American assistance— but that the threats now were coming from Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldavia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. In each case, Turkey had a better educational system, a better phone system, a better public health system, a better governmental system, a better set of newspapers, a legal system, an economic system, an army, etc. While it was going to be wrenching for Turkey to make a decision about what to do in this world of many choices, where to put its assets, they were in the driver's seat. If they husbanded their resources, they could deal with Russia, with Armenia, with Azerbaijan, Central Asia, the Black Sea riparians, and could emerge over a 10 or 15 year period as the regional power based on treaties, and a set of post-Cold War relationships that would make them the dominant player in the region. I thought that was the challenge. We would have to talk with the Turks about their possible future to nudge them in the right direction. It meant winding down our military assistance, helping them get into Europe based on trade and economic reforms, urging them to be more accommodating to their Kurdish citizens, helping them knit their relationships with all Arab states, and teaming up with them where we could to achieve mutual goals in Central Asia,

with Russia, and elsewhere. This was a new vision and something like that has come about in the years since I have left.

But the Turks have found it difficult to escape their own domestic turmoil. One success story has been the tremendous economic development and industrial exports, assisted in good part by foreign and private investment in Turkish means of production. Everyone thinks of the Turks as soldiers and to some extent as diplomats, but nobody thinks of them as bankers and industrialists, but it's in these areas where they have flourished to an extraordinary degree, leaving the Greeks behind. The Greeks were always thought of as the businessmen in that part of the world, not the military men. Now it's the opposite. It's a whole new world for Turkey and we have kept a pretty good relationship with them. I think that's a wise decision, but the vision of a regional power that we developed in the early 1990's has not really materialized.

Q: Had Madame Chiler taken over in Turkey while you were there?

RANSOM: No, the person who was in charge of Turkey at that time was Turgid Ozal, an extraordinary figure who really changed Turkey in many important ways. But I did meet with Chiler when President Bush went to Greece and Turkey on a trip after the Gulf War. The trip to Turkey brought us to Istanbul.

Q: What is the time frame you are describing?

RANSOM: It must have been 1991, maybe 1992. In the lead-up to the Gulf War and during the war we had many conversations with Turgid Ozal, whom President Bush admired as a leader and as a friend in a time of need. There were more than 52 conversations by telephone between George Bush and Ozal. I had developed a relationship with the people in the White House while serving as a country director. I suggested calls, ideas, words, that the president might use; in return I got playback from them on these conversations. This was enormously useful both for myself and for Mort Abramowitz in charting a course in American relations with Turkey. Ozal was eager to have his friend George Bush come to

Turkey; he was losing support of the Turkish population. He had gotten too far out in front of his countrymen. His relations with the military were strained. He had coalition problems in parliament and he thought George Bush's trip would give him a great boost in popularity. It did, but it wasn't enough to stop the steady descent in public opinion and he eventually was voted out of office in new elections.

The trip to Istanbul and to Ankara with the President was wonderful. It was quite unusual that a country director should be taken along on a presidential trip. Usually, no one below an assistant secretary would be invited. But by this time, I had become pretty much “Mr. Turkey” in the Department of State. The European bureau chiefs were quite willing to see me step into the role of trip coordinator. Every stage of the visit was something that I had planned, choreographed, and scripted. The themes and talking points had all come out of my office, usually working with Nick Burns, now our ambassador in Greece, who was in the NSC at the time, and Jane Howell, an Army officer, who was a very talented NSC staff member.

I had used the NSC communications channel, which was outside of the Department of State. I think I put it to good use on many occasions, but never so remarkably as at the end of the war when I drafted letters for George Bush to send to the leaders of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait, asking them each to fund a Turkish purchase of F-16s at a cost of $1 billion each. In the lead-up to the war, I had been very busy trying to put together various aid packages. We got aid specifically designated for Turkey from Germany, Britain, Japan, and many other countries. We used the oil pipeline closing as the issue that framed the request, but, in fact, I managed to get the issue of Turkish aid onto the agenda of many international meetings at a time that we were putting together the coalition. The totals of U.S. and other aid to Turkey came to over $6 billion. The Turks never really like to acknowledge this, but it was an extraordinary windfall. As I said very plainly to their chief of staff, their foreign minister, and their prime minister, if it hadn't been for American assistance, they wouldn't have gotten any of it. The assistance from Japan

may as well have come from the United States. They understood that and appreciated it, but they didn't really want to acknowledge it.

The aircraft sale was something which appeared to be a presidential initiative. In fact, it had to go through Scowcroft. If he checked with anybody in the department of state, I don't know about it. He may have talked to Eagleburger. But the letters were sent and they caused a considerable amount of distress in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait because it was such a large sum of money coming at the end of a war which had already cost all of these states a great deal. Chas Freeman in particular regarded it as a travesty of American diplomacy. He had no idea how the letter was written or from where it had come. But he didn't want to deliver it. For that, he won a rebuke for himself in James Baker's book about diplomacy. Baker said that one of our best ambassador's had been afflicted with clientitis. But despite all reservations, these countries delivered. It didn't come out to be $3 billion, but it was $2 billion. The F-16s are now in Turkey. They were actually built in Turkey and that was another achievement that we claim that benefited Turkey.

Q: On this particular issue, how about the Greek lobby? How did that play in this particular affair?

RANSOM: The Greek lobby had long maintained a limit on aid to Turkey by supporting a ratio on aid for Greece and Turkey which it managed to get Congress to impose.

Q: Five to three.

RANSOM: Five to three, that's right. The Greeks were worried about it. At some stage, we told the Greeks “The time has come for you to make your own buy of F-16s”. Eventually they did so. We sold an awful lot of those airplanes.

When it came time for George Bush to go to Turkey, Turgit Ozal was greatly beholden to him and vice versa. They got along famously. But we probably were guilty of over-programming the President. On Sunday in Istanbul, I had insisted that he meet with

opposition parties. Demirel was the head of the opposition party. George Bush, a man into his sixties, worked very hard on this trip; he gave many, many speeches and toward the end was tired. He complained to Scowcroft beforehand (with me standing there) that these meetings on Sunday went beyond what he thought was necessary or advisable. Scowcroft looked at me bleakly, but the die was cast; Demirel was on his way. He showed up with Chiler, whom I knew only very vaguely as a woman who had been trained as an economic advisor. Demirel, a very candid politician, came in and sat down, looked at the president very closely, saw he was tired but trying to be interested. He moved forward in his chair and said, “You are looking at the next prime minister of Turkey.” Instantly, George Bush, the politician, a man who had to seek approval from the voters in a democracy, was engaged; they had a wonderful conversation about how this change was going to come about and what it would mean. Demirel made it very clear that if he became the prime minister, his relationship with the United States would be just as good if not better than it had been. Turkey was a friend. He had supported the role of Turkey during the war. He certainly thought that in the post-Cold War period, America should be Turkey's best friend.

He then turned to Chiler and he said he wanted her to say a few words about the economy. With great poise and aplomb, she did so. Afterwards, Bush asked me who she was. I gave him a thumbnail sketch of the person off the top of my head, but I never imagined in my wildest dreams that within a year and a half, two years, she would be the prime minister of Turkey herself—the head of a major party, when Demirel moved up to become the president.

Q: Was the Kurdish situation raised by either Bush or Ozal?

RANSOM: It was raised by Bush, and Ozal discussed it. Ozal was a relative liberal on this issue. But he had to deal with his own military. They tended to want to respond to every attack with more attacks of their own. They were very disturbed by the possibility that a sanctuary could develop in Iran. Turgit Ozal tried his best to bring about a policy of cultural autonomy in which Kurdish would be taught in schools, printed in newspapers,

and broadcast on the radio. The Kurdish problem is not one that is easily solved by democracy. If it had been, the Turks would have long solved it since almost 35% of the Turkish parliament is of Kurdish origin—men and some women living in the western part of Turkey having moved there from the poor, impoverished southeast and then going into politics. There are no disturbances involving Kurds outside of the area along the border with Syria and Iraq. If you go to Istanbul, entire sections of the city are Kurdish. But there are no troubles. They have been absorbed by the Turkish economy.

Turgit Ozal's view of the unrest in the southeast was that the state needed time to finish a massive project of development focused on a lot of dams that were being built out there. The electricity that was generated and the irrigation water that was captured would eventually generate the type of income and employment that Kurds needed in order to move away from their restlessness. In the meantime, he wanted autonomy of some sort to allow the government to wean those of moderate opinions away from the PKK— the Kurdish radical group. The Kurdish radical group, however, was absolutely uncompromising and they were extraordinarily brutal. The military made the case very forcefully that they simply couldn't allow the PKK to take over under the guise of cultural autonomy. We talked a good game on cultural rights and on political accommodation with the Kurds. The president did his duty and spoke all the right words on these issues, but the larger issues that were discussed were those of post-war economic development in the Caucasus in Central Asia, how to deal with Russians after the breakup of the Soviet Union, a little bit on Greek-Turkish affairs, and some other items. The war effort had put our relationship on a new basis and nothing was going to disturb that.

Q: Were we looking for Turkey maybe to become not our instrument, but an instrument of moving into the "Stans," Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and all that. There is a Turkish root to most of these tribes. Were the Turks opposed to the Iranians moving into these areas?

RANSOM: Yes, we were. We thought that with the Russian power in that area of the world eviscerated, Turkey would be able to play a stabilizing and a useful role. In fact, the Turks have done that, but it was beyond their means to do as much as we expected and hoped they could do or as much as they hoped and expected to do. The Iranian threat has not really materialized in that part of the world. The Russians have for the most part maintained a disappointed but unprovocative stance, except in Chechnya. The Turks are slowly building relationships with the “Stans” which will be useful but not dominating.What was not understood in the European Bureau in particular — this is a fascinating sidelight on that whole time I spent there — was that the nations of the Caucuses in Central Asia simply didn't want the Russians to rule them anymore. This came as quite a shock. Some “Europeanists” had spent their whole lives studying the Soviet Union and to understand how to deal with a communist government. They felt that the Russians had conquered the area fair and square in the last century, that it was a matter of national interest for the Russians to maintain their presence there. The Russians had no interest in siding with Muslim groups whom they didn't know and didn't respect. The “Europeanists” were quite shocked, as were their friends and colleagues in Moscow, when these countries stood up and said, “Thank you, we will rule ourselves and we don't need you to tell us how to do it.” There was a great deal of tugging and pulling on this.

Frankly, coming from the Near Eastern Bureau, I was a very lonely voice in stating the case that these cultures and civilizations anteceded those in Russia, that the new countries had a strong impulse to independence, and that we should be working with that as much as we could rather than lamenting the demise of Russian influence in that part of the world. Among our issues were nuclear weapons, trade, development of oil (which had only begun, of course), etc. We had an aid program running in this part of the world. We were struggling desperately to open up embassies. The European Bureau suddenly became the bureau in the world that had not only the most embassy openings, but the most embassies with 25% allowances. For people who are accustomed to serving in Rome, Paris, and London, it came as a stunning surprise that they had to set up

embassies in places that they had never really paid any attention to like Almaty—then called Alma Ata. They didn't have an awful lot of patience or interest in it.

I would say that the European Bureau by and large missed the boat on everything that was important. They dealt with the issues of the past, i.e. NATO issues, disarmament issues, very effectively. They managed to do some things on the EU and on trade issues. But when the war came, they saw it as somebody else's war even though the British, the French, the Germans, the Italians, and many others were involved, even though we sent an entire Army corps out of Germany to the frontlines in the desert, even though it was clearly a fight for oil that controlled industrial economies of the entire globe. EUR didn't want to be bothered by these events, just like they didn't want to be bothered by anything that was messy and non-European - and Central Asia qualified for all of that.So, while I was asserting a role for Turkey in this part of the world, I was fighting people who were Russophiles. They were people who had been trained to deal with communism and although certainly were not sympathetic with communism, simply could not understand how new nations could take the place of the Russian empire.

Q: I've interviewed people who were working in EUR in 1974 when Greece, Turkey, and Cyprus were being dumped in the European Bureau at the same time Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece were almost at war. There was a real question about how did these peasants get into the European elite? From what you're saying, it sounds like in 1991, they turned over a presidential visit to a country director. It's Turkey and Greece!

RANSOM: That's right. After I had been on the job in SE for several months, working away and trying to get my bearings. I had made a trip out to Turkey early on and had done well because I made the right call about what Turkey was going to do—I was almost the only person in the Department of State who did. I have to point out to you that wisdom in this case was aided, I think, by the fact that it was a 50/50 chance. They were either going to say “Yes” or “No.” I said, “Yes” and they said, “Yes.” That suddenly made me look good

and wise - wiser and better than the circumstances would really justify. But I never like to discourage people from thinking highly of me. .

Q: You just replied with a modest shrug of your shoulders.

RANSOM: That's right. The memo I wrote was memorable because it listed all the pros and cons of the Turkish decision, concluding that they would assent, which they did, despite all the reasons why they might not.

Q: I've been doing a series of interviews with David Jones. He was involved with Reg Bartholomew in Greek base negotiations a little before your time. He noted an interesting Turkish aspect; when you're negotiating with them, if they didn't want to do something, they wouldn't do it. That was it. They were pretty blunt about it. You couldn't bring them around. With the Greeks, they'd give you all sorts of pain and aches, but at the end of the day, even when you're dealing with Andreas Papandreou, you kind of got what you wanted. But the road there was awful. I don't know if you ever caught any of that.

RANSOM: They are very different people in the way they operate. I preferred to deal with Turks because it is my nature to speak very bluntly and plainly about issues. If an agreement can be reached, fine. If not, I don't mind pushing very hard. I don't particularly mind if parties push back. But the Greeks were complainers.

There were also some more fundamental differences between Greece and Turkey. Greece is a country of 10 million people, half of whom live in Athens, one of the most inhospitable cities on Earth. Pollution, crowding, noise, poor services, no parks. It is a place where I had lived as a boy and I remember it as being an open and a different kind of environment. But it just seems that some force has decided that Greece would be a difficult and disagreeable place to live in. More than that, the Greeks were going through traumas of their own at the end of the Cold War. They always had a border to the north with Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Albania that was hostile but absolutely safe. Ever since the Greek civil war ended in the defeat of the communists, the border had been maintained as

a sacrosanct barrier leaving the Greeks free to turn their full attention to the Turks, whom they imagined to be a greater threat.

Now suddenly fate had robbed them of this certainty and had reversed the situation. The threats to Greece now came from the north—from a free Albania, a dissolving Yugoslavia (Macedonia is what part of Yugoslavia became) and from a Bulgaria that was in trouble. The Turks were potential allies in such a struggle. Greece was too small and too sclerotic to have two fronts. They essentially had to have some sort of settlement with Turkey. It didn't have to be a loving settlement. It didn't have to be a complete settlement. But it had to be something that bought them time, rather than trouble so that they could concentrate on new perceived threats.

We worked very hard on both Cyprus and an Aegean settlement and on reducing the Turkish military presence in the Aegean. We supported approaches such as the Black Sea initiative which we thought should bring the Greeks into some kind of cooperative enterprise with the Turks under this new Ankara initiative. Itsatakis, the premier, understood this, but to do it became very, very difficult. We were constantly getting in trouble in Greece over the human rights report or something else because the Greeks understood clearly what they were going to do in the next 10-20 years. They could never be a regional power like Turkey. They could never be an industrial power like Turkey. What would their relationship to be with others? The EU fed them huge amounts of aid, but that made them a stipendiary. They had problems deciding on their role. They were having a lot of trouble thinking it through. I liked Itsatakis very much, admired him very much. We did a lot of business with his government. We had a very cordial relationship. But I found the Greeks much harder to deal with than Turks.

The one area on which I spent a huge amount of time was Cyprus. We eventually came within a whisker of an agreement. This was a time when both Greece and Turkey for the reasons I have mentioned were at least amenable to American and UN efforts to get a settlement on Cyprus. At my suggestion, we gave up the idea of a comprehensive

settlement and looked for what we could do — a la the Middle East — with interim steps. I worked out with Gus Faysel, Nelson Ledsky, and some others — a very talented little group—a document which would have returned land to Greece, given a great deal of autonomy to the north, reopened the airport in the center of the island under UN auspices, allowed Turkish Cypriots to get titles to their land, and established a claims settlement procedure. We went to Denktash and said, “We don't know if Clerides will sign this.”

Q: Can you explain who Clerides and Denktash were?

RANSOM: Denktash was the president of the northern Turkish section of Cyprus, who had been democratically elected. This state was propped up entirely by Turkish aid and defended by Turkish military. Clerides was the prime minister of Cyprus—the government we recognized. Our embassy was in Nicosia on the Greek side of the dividing line, but we drove to the northern part of the island regularly and saw all the politicians there. Whenever I went out to Cyprus, I would go to see as many people as possible — businessmen as well government officials — and would make a call on the Turkish ambassador and the Turkish military commander. We tried to develop an atmosphere which would allow some political movement. It would have been a large step, but only an interim one.

My view was that the interim step would probably be close to the last step that would be taken. But anyway, Denktash agreed to a paper thinking Clerides would reject it. We then went to see Clerides, who agreed, thinking Denktash would reject it. In the end, it was Clerides who was right. Denktash, when he realized that Clerides would go along with this, got hold of his Turkish military friends to force a withdrawal. The scheme collapsed. I, however, felt that Cyprus was doable. We worked very, very hard on it. Nelson Ledsky was the special negotiator for Cyprus. Despite my failure on this, I still think all of those efforts were worthwhile. If we could have brokered some sort of an agreement of that sort, the relationship between Greece and Turkey could have been vastly eased.

At one point, Nelson Ledsky and I sent some papers on Cyprus to Jim Baker and he called us up. He said, “Now, what are you trying to do?” There I was a mere country director. I said, “Look, there is a chance - not a good chance, but a chance - less than 50% - I don't think less than 25% - that we can get a settlement. If we do, there will be a number of very positive effects. Even if we fail, in my view, it's better than not trying. We can handle the negotiations by ourselves for right now. We don't need your help or the administration's commitment in any major way. But if we get close, we will need both. So, if you think that it's not a viable situation for the Bush administration to push on a Cyprus agreement that will provoke some Greek dissent in this country and in Greece and some Turkish dissent as well, let us know now. We will stop. We can fool around on this instead of working at it earnestly.” Jim Baker said, “That is a very good way to put it. You keep on going. Don't come to me all the time, but if you need help— if you get close— I'll help and the president will help. That is the sort of thing we ought to be doing now that we are the uncontested power in the world.” I thought that was a magnificent clear instruction on how to proceed and why. I still remember that as one of Jim Baker's shining moments. In fact, when we did need him later on, he was available. We reminded him of what he said. He made phone calls. He invited people to Washington. It still didn't work. Both embassies in Athens and in Ankara were very skeptical of our efforts. They had no interest in wasting their capital on a Cyprus settlement when they thought their embassy and their country had more important issues that should be of concern. But the Cyprus issue was a major effort of mine for three years of my life. As I say, I would like to have very much been involved in a continuing effort. In fact, I was going to be involved in a continuing effort. Tom Niles, at the end of my stay in the European Bureau (he had taken over from Ray Seitz) called me in and said that he was nominating me to be the ambassador in Cyprus. I was delighted. John Kelly was still squatting in NEA and I wasn't going to go anywhere there. Cyprus was very near Cairo, which is where my wife, Marjorie, had been assigned as embassy PAO — a public affairs section that was as big as most embassies in other parts of the world. So, I thought a 45 minute flight back and forth between Nicosia and Cairo was great. Anyway, I wanted to be involved in this. I was a believer. It could be done. So, my name

went forward. Nobody from EUR/SE had ever been named to an ambassadorial position before. For me to come in from another bureau and be nominated by EUR to head a post was extraordinary. The White House staff approved the nomination. However, President Clinton had a candidate.

Q: This was a new administration.

RANSOM: It was a new administration. They had a candidate of their own. He was a Cypriot-American born in the northern part of Cyprus with a lot of unrecovered lands there. As a small town lawyer in northern New Jersey, he had been one of the first to support Clinton when Clinton made his forays into the Northeast. Clinton remembered. This man was eager for a reward; he had one and only one in mind - to be ambassador to Cyprus.

I got a call from somebody on behalf of Brent Scowcroft. The question was, “Tell me what you think the impact would be if we have a Cypriot-American with unrecovered lands in the north going to Cyprus.” I said, “I am in an impossible position. Whether you know it or not, I am the State Department candidate for Cyprus — the secretary's candidate. I can only tell you what I think, but you're going to have to take it with a grain of salt because the conflict of interest is so manifest. He will never be received by Denktash. He will never have any standing above the fray. He will be a captive of the most right-wing parts of the Cypriot community. He is not a man of broad legal or political experience in this country. I don't think he'd be a very good candidate to go to that country. Frankly, I think the U.S. should assign only experienced diplomats to this post, which, with one exception, we've always done before. The exception was pretty good. He was a guy from Texas. He was a businessman. He was a good guy. But the gentleman from New Jersey is the wrong one.”

Eventually the White House approved my nomination, after an unusually long delay. But they had to find a place for the New Jersey guy. They offered him the ambassadorship to Luxembourg. But the previous administration had already nominated a man to Luxembourg by the name of Richard Boucher, a career officer. Richard Boucher was the

one person that the outgoing administration had asked the incoming administration to take care of. He had served as deputy spokesman so loyally and so well through the end of the Bush administration. He was a very nice guy — basically a China hand. The White House decided to assign him to Cyprus.

The director general called me up and she said, “I have bad news and good news.” I had no idea what was coming. I said, “Well, give me the bad news first.” She said, “You're not going to Cyprus.” I said, “What?” When she told me the story, I was stunned. I said, “But the secretary nominated me and the president formally approved me. We are moving right now on scheduling hearings. I've submitted all the required papers.” She said, “That is alright, but you're not going to Cyprus.” I said, “My god! What happens to me now? I don't have a job. I'm leaving EUR/SE.” She said, “Well, your home base is the Middle East.” I said, “I don't think they're going to support me.” She said, “I will. How would you like to go to Bahrain?” In a flash, I said, “I'd love it.” That strange story is how I ended up going back to the Middle East bureau that I knew and loved so well.

Q: John Kelly had moved on by this time?

RANSOM: John Kelly had moved on and Ed Djerejian had come. For various reasons, I wasn't going to be a favorite of Ed Djerejian. He wouldn't have nominated me on his own initiative for any post in his area. But the Department's leadership presented him with a fait accompli and that's the way it worked out.

Q: Before we leave that European bureau, what were some of the issues that we had to deal with Greece?

RANSOM: We had to deal with a number of issues that had to do with Albania because there was a part of the Greek society which believed that the borders there should be changed so that some unrecovered Greek lands inside Albania could be rejoined to the home land. There was a Greek empress. There was a Greek minority in Albania and these

people, many of them embittered by memories of the Greek civil war, pushed us very hard to help them solve these problems.

The Greeks often cast this problem as a fight between Islam and Christianity, something which I simply couldn't accept. My background in the Middle East made it clear to me that there were Muslims who were good and Muslims who were bad and you could easily deal with the good ones.

Q: And the Albanian Muslims were your connection to the greater Muslim world anyway.

RANSOM: Right. I had no interest in seeing revanchist aims become part of Greece's goals. We made it very clear to the Greeks that we would never support them on this. If they wanted to have consulates in Albania where the Greeks lived, that would be ok; we would talk to the Albanians about that. We would talk to the Albanians about freedom of religion and about the rights and property of the Greek Church. We could take a number of positions in tandem with the Greeks, but it had to be on the basis of a good neighbor policy of Greece with Albania.

That was hard to get across. It was complicated - inflamed is the only word I can think of. One of the utterly curious and incomprehensible Greek syndromes was their rage about the name “Macedonia...” When that province of Yugoslavia pulled away from Yugoslavia and tried to establish itself independently, the Greeks had no objection until it became clear they were going to be calling the new country “Macedonia.” Then an enormous demonstration erupted in Thessalonica in the north. What you have to understand about Thessalonica is that it should be the port for all of the Balkans— not Istanbul, not Sofia, not Tirana or ports in Albania, but Thessalonica because its access by rail and by road is so much better than all the others.

In fact, the Greeks could have been involved in a whole new set of activitiesnew business in the northern part of Greece. But they were totally uninterested in that. They were interested in the name “Macedonia.” When people tried to make the point that Alexander

the Great was a Macedonian who had come from that northern part of Greece, there was even more outrage. “He is ours! He is Greek. He is the torch holder of Greek civilization. He took it all the way to India. The world benefited.”

Q: He conquered Athens. This was a hostile power.

RANSOM: “They are now trying to rob us of our patrimony.” I said, “Your patrimony is Christian, not classical. What are you so upset by? What's the issue?” Their intransigence held up our recognition of Macedonia for a very long time. When the demonstration took place in Thessalonica, the Greek government embraced it.

That activated important segments of the Greek community in the U.S. There were 11 Greeks donors who gave $100,000 or more for the political campaign. In Bush's first election, they had gone heavily Republican. But in 1992, it was clear that they were not going to go Republican again. They were going to go Democratic. When they did, Clinton felt we had to pay them off. This was strict politics. Larry Eagleburger, who was the Secretary of State at the end under Bush, wanted very much to go ahead with recognition of Macedonia. I took the Greek side of the case - not that I believed in it, but I thought it had to be argued within the administration. So, I entered the Clinton administration with a tremendous success. Eagleburger himself called me at one point and said, “Are you opposing me?” I said, “Yes sir, I put it in a memo. I told you why.” He said, “I have this memo. I'm glad you're up-front about this, David. I rather like that, even though I think this is a terrible position for you to take.” I said, “Well, I'm taking it because of specific reasons and they're all listed there in that memo.”

In the Clinton administration, there was a tremendous desire to accommodate the Greeks on this issue. For all the time I was there, we did that.

Q: I have the feeling that the Clinton administration in foreign policy came in very unsure of itself, essentially very weak, and was trying to be accommodating. There was no real strong leadership, which had to come from the top. Clinton was not familiar with the

issues. Christopher was more a lawyer needed to straighten out problems. Did you get the feeling that this was, at least at the beginning, a pretty weak foreign affairs administration?

RANSOM: I'm not sure I'd put it quite that way. I saw it rather differently. The effect is, I guess, the same, but my description of the situation would be different. Clinton believed he had beaten the best foreign policy president since Harry Truman because he touted that the economy and domestic issues should be given priority. His mandate, such as it was, was not to spend too much time on foreign affairs. He made it clear to Christopher that, while we weren't going to withdraw from the world—he was not an isolationist by any means; he was an internationalist- - he was going to give priority and attention to domestic issues. He didn't want his time taken up by and his political capital wasted on these foreign affairs matters.

That meant giving a great deal of priority to what key congressmen and senators wanted. That meant that in the case of Greece and Turkey, for instance, Paul Sarbanes, who had been a bete noir for Bush, but isolated because he was a Democrat, suddenly became a very powerful and influential figure. I had established a relationship with him. We frequently went up to the Hill to brief him on Greek, Turkish, and Cypriot affairs and to be exposed in the process to rages and temperamental shouting matches. They were no matches with me because I couldn't quite shout back, but I held my own on the issues and I came out as kind of a friend of Paul Sarbanes, except on Greek affairs which he treated as part of his political problems.

Q: Sarbanes is an interesting person when we talk about Greek affairs. Were his interests absorbed through his mother's milk as far as his Greek heritage or was it political?

RANSOM: Pavlo Sarbanis. It was absorbed through his mother's milk; that's right. His Greek schoolteacher wife had the same strong feelings on the subject. There was no political capital for Paul Sarbanes to be a friend of Turkey or to be evenhanded in the Greek-Turkish matters. He felt that he had fought a losing battle for a long time during the

Republican administration—not being listened to or having any influence. When Clinton was elected, he saw a chance to shine. I would go to him and say, “If we get close to a settlement on Cyprus, you have to support it. We can't fight you and the Congress at the same time you're fighting the right wingers in Greece and in Turkey.” He said, “If you get close, come see me again. I'll see if I can support you.” I think he would have. He is a very smart man. He wanted to make a difference. But he was a man with whom you had deal carefully.

At one point, he called me up. He was very upset during the Cypriot elections because he thought that we weren't doing enough to support the candidate he wanted. That was the incumbent president who was running for reelection against Clerides. I said, “We have already done a number of things for our friend George. He is our friend as well as yours, but we're not going to do a damn thing more.” (This was on the telephone, so I was a little braver.) “We are certainly not going to invite him to the States at the last minute just before the elections. We are going to let this election be decided by the Cypriots.” He said, “Well, who is likely to win?” I said, “Well, I don't know who is going to win. It's very close. But either Clerides or George is fine with us. We can live happily with either one. There is not a whole lot of difference between them.” He fumed, but he accepted that as an answer. George lost. Clerides won. Again, I thought it was amazing that a country director could be involved directly and in such an extraordinary way with movers and shakers of the American political scene.

Q: You were dealing with what the European bureau considered as garbage.

RANSOM: That's right. They were quite happy to have me do it. I didn't make an issue of my contacts. If asked, I acknowledged them. I occasionally told people when they had to know what was happening. But for the most part, I think I read the situation correctly. They wanted me to handle southeast Europe and I did.

Q: By the way, I spent five years in Yugoslavia as chief of the consular section and then later four years as consul general in Athens. So, I've had my nose rubbed in Macedonia. It doesn't surprise me. It's irrational. What was your memo to Eagleburger supporting the Greek side about holding off and recognition? What was the rationale for doing that?

RANSOM: The rationale was not domestic. Clearly, it was going to be an issue, but it wasn't an issue that had to be decided in the memos in the State Department or in the foreign affairs establishment. The issue was whether we could broker a compromise that would allow us to move forward on Macedonian recognition without provoking Greek retaliation in the form of boycotts. If we were going to go into a full-scale fight with Greece, a NATO ally, over a former Yugoslavian province, we were going to buy a lot of trouble. So, we brokered this compromise with the Greeks on the former Yugoslavian province of Macedonia. It was crazy, but it finally worked.

Q: It's finally slipped into being Macedonia.

RANSOM: Yes. I told the Greeks at the time, “We're going to call it Macedonia. We are not going to use this made-up name. You can say whatever you want, but in our statements, we are going to say 'the Macedonians.'" They hated that. It was a ridiculous issue and no one could ever completely explain it to me. All I knew was that the passions were inflamed in Greece over this issue.

Q: It's difficult to love the Greeks en masse. I was never so happy in my life as when I left Greece. I was tired of every time I turned around hearing people saying, “If you Americans hadn't done this, we'd be living better.” There was always somebody else to blame. It was a delight to go to Italy, where they said, “Gee, we screwed up” and everything wasn't our fault.

RANSOM: The Greeks see themselves as victims. They live in the shadow as victims of the Turks and victims, I think, of history. They are so insignificant in relationship to

their classical past. They can't contribute much. There are deep running splits in Greece between different parts of the country—the islands and the mainland, the north, and the south. The civil war made all of these tensions much worse.

The left-right split was particularly deep. It was deep in every country in Europe, but it certainly had its effect in Greece. They seem always to look for a protector. Their disappointment with us when we don't do everything they wanted us to do, drives them usually to overestimate what we could do for them. I worked very hard at being a friend of Greece with my boyhood experience there. I found it a challenge, but by and large we were successful in managing the relationship.

Turkey, on the other hand, had a destiny in its geographic area—the Balkans, Central Asia, the Caucuses, the Middle East, and Russia— and had more choices than it could deal with. That was their problem. They didn't have the resources of statecraft or economics to deal with all of the possibilities, but they could play the role of a regional power. The Greeks couldn't. They had no choices. Their only choice was to get along with Turkey. Their northern border was in trouble, was a threat to them; that was the major problem. It's a difficult country. My good friend, Nick Burns, is now the ambassador there and he says he never imagined in all of his days of dealing with Greece — with me when he was in the White House and I was in State — that he would be the subject of so many threats over Kosovo. The last time I talked to him, he was talking about cutting the embassy, sending people home and ending normal contacts with Greek people.

Q: On the Kosovo issue, Greece basically came down on the side of the Russians and of the Serbs.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: And very reluctantly. In a way, Greece has moved farther and farther away from being considered to be part of NATO. I think also the European Union, too.

RANSOM: The Europeans still flood it with money. Billions of dollars a year.

Q: However, my impression is that Greece is becoming more isolated. Geography is beginning to catch up.

RANSOM: Assert itself. Greece is becoming one of the nations of the Balkans. Turkey is a big country.

Q: Let's move on. You were assigned to Bahrain. You were in Bahrain from when to when?

RANSOM: 1994 to 1997—a wonderful tour of duty.

Q: What was the situation on Bahrain when you arrived? What did you feel were the issues that you had to deal with?

RANSOM: When I went to Bahrain, it was a peaceful place with no disturbances of any sort. Over the course of my three years there, disturbances not only emerged, they spread and became the worst in the history of the island with the Shia, in effect, in revolt, conducting street demonstrations. That was not clear at the time I went. I thought my major task would be dealing with the U.S. Navy - to defeat it, if necessary, if it wished to expand inordinately. That had traditionally been the view of the State Department.

We had half a billion dollars worth of trade with tiny Bahrain. That hardly seems possible, but there it was—lots of money. So, I thought we were primarily a commercial mission. Bahrain sat in a lot of councils, the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), the Arab League, etc. I thought there might be a small role to be played as an interlocutor on some of the broader Arab issues. Maybe we could find out something about Iran from Bahrain because a lot of people went back and forth. Those were very modest goals. Our embassy had about 70 Americans in it and another 70-80 locals, in a large, handsome building. It had a reputation of being a place that was very nice. Bahrainis are very, very agreeable people.

It turned out to be a much more complicated set of tasks. Bahrain wasn't a peaceful country by the end of my tour. We had to make some hard choices about how to support friends involved in putting down the rebellion. Our navy—and our military in general, the air force in particular— had good reasons to expand their presence in Bahrain. I had to negotiate that. We did so. I went from commercial work to issues of economic reform that would make Bahrain a better place for private investment in a post-communist world. I found that Bahrainis were just as agreeable and pleasant as everybody had always described them.

Q: Could you talk a little about the government of Bahrain?

RANSOM: The government of Bahrain was led by a man I came to love very much, Sheikh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, a canny, humorous, generous, charming man who had been on the throne for many years. He died in March of this year. He liked people to think that he didn't do much. In fact, his tactic was to wait until there was agreement among his brothers, uncles, and others in the government and then confirm it. But I saw that when there was no agreement, he would decide. But he would wait. He would decide very carefully. It is fair to say that during the time he had to make some of the most difficult decisions involving the rebellion, I developed a very close, personal friendship with him; we could talk about these things. He did not exactly ask me for my advice. I never lectured him. But we were able in weekly meetings over a cup of tea on Friday afternoon in his beach place to have a very good talk about what was to be decided and how it was to be decided. This was interspersed with jokes, accounts of our families, etc. It just had to be one of the best relationships I've ever had in my career. I similarly had very close and good relationships with the ministers of Defense, Interior, Justice, Economy, and particularly Foreign Affairs. These were relationships that reached the point where I could pick up the telephone and do some business over the telephone very quickly. I could always see them if I asked. I found that as time went on and we developed a closer relationship, I had the

kind of access that other ambassadors in the Gulf would have died to have. It was partly a matter of the fact that Bahrain was a small place.

Q: They all are.

RANSOM: They all are. Frankly, I always thought it was a matter of building good personal relationships. That is the one thing which ambassadors have to do. They have to be in with the guys at the top. They have to be able to get to them to deliver messages. They have to wield influence. That is the one thing ambassador can do that no one else in the mission can and the one thing that people in Washington count on you doing. Bahrain is not at the center of attention of the NEA people. They tended to let the Gulf and Iraqi affairs be run by DOD. That was perfectly fine with me because my contacts there were still superb — The Navy, the JCS, the ISA, and CINCOM. But I always felt that State's preoccupation with the Arab-Israeli peace process blinded it to the importance of the Gulf, where there were vital national security interests that had to be protected. It is one of the two areas, along with Korea, which rate that type of description in the post-communist era. We fought a war because of it. We spend hundreds of millions, indeed billions, of dollars every year to maintain it. Bahrain was in a part of the world where there are no alliances among the various parties which live there and no alliances between any of the parties and us. Everything was done on a bilateral basis. Bahrain was unusually important. It was the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet. It was a Navy base. Unlike other parts of the Gulf, where eventually we will be asked to leave (Saudi Arabia will ask us to leave, for instance, when Saddam goes.), we will be in Bahrain forever. So, we had a unique relationship with and an interest in Bahrain. It is unique, special, big, and important as long as the Gulf is big and important and it supplies petroleum to the world. But it's fair to say, I think, that we got a desultory amount of time and attention from NEA. They were really only interested in the peace process.

Q: Before, during the Gulf War, the Gulf situation had gotten no attention at all in the Department or NEA until all of a sudden they had the biggest major war we've had since

the end of the Vietnam War. It came out of nowhere. In a way, they had been there, taken care of that, and now they reverted back to the old Palestinian problem.

RANSOM: There has been a trend in the Department of State to move from Arabists to a new group of people. I wish them well in their work. They are increasingly Jewish. They have come into diplomacy because of their interest — their legitimate and strong interest — in the peace process. God knows they are lucky to have come in when the prospects of peace are better than ever before and Arabs are really ready to make peace. They are doing what comes naturally to them and what makes sense to them. They are well schooled. They are energetic. They are high-minded. They are as least as unbalanced as Arabists were, but in the opposite direction. I'm not sure how unbalanced we were. They see their role as helping Israel settle its fight with the Arab world. So did I, but I would never be able to convince any of them that that was my view.

Anyway, the way it worked out was okay. DoD did the policy work for the most part. DoD visited the region. Nobody from the State Department ever came out. It took the role of managing the Security Council fights and NEA had something to do with that. But it is a bureau consumed by the peace process. That is about all.

Q: Talk about the rebellion. How did this come about? What caused it?

RANSOM: The population of Bahrain is about 65% Shia. That group is divided into many parts. The largest part, probably a majority of the population, consists of Arab Shia who had been in Bahrain for a long time. The other Shia came from elsewhere in the Gulf, including Iran. They're also divided in many ways not by education so much, but by class. Wealthier Shia tended to side with the government and wanted to make their peace with the government, but the poorer Shia, who were much larger in number had economic grievances. The grievances were partly that Bahrain had so many foreign laborers in the country. They were partly there because of the “glass ceilings” imposed on the jobs Shia could occupy in the Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, and lots of others. There were

ministries that were heavily Shia, such as Education, Health, and Public Works, but they did not have their fair share of political power.

There was a whole nest of issues. There was no way for these to be expressed in the normal course of political life because there was no normal course of political life. The brother of the emir wanted nothing more than for Shia to kowtow to him and say “Thanks” for all he had given them and done for them. The idea of allowing them greater participation in public life was simply anathema to him. The only place that Shia could visit freely was to an unusual Shia institution called the “mahtin.” This is a house of mourning. It is not a mosque. They are set up in every community, usually by wealthy donors. They are places that are built with kitchens and classrooms. There the membership read and celebrated Shia history. There are Shia holidays that other Sunni Muslims don't observe and they all get observed in the mahtin. They read and studied the classic works of Shia jurisprudence, history, poetry, and thinking.

Sunnis have no idea that these things exist. It became very clear to me very quickly that what was happening amounted to a community mobilization. The people who got control of the disaffection of the Shia on the island were young Shia clerics educated in Goh, in Iran. They were no friends of ours, although they never made foreign policy issues prominent in their campaign, never threatened Americans, and never threatened our naval base.

Their goal was to move toward an Islamic republic somewhat akin to what had been set up in Iran. That didn't mean they were Iranian agents. It didn't mean they wanted to do in Bahrain exactly what they had seen in Iran. The Bahraini Sunni's approach was totally different. Their simple idea was, “We need to be able to elect a new parliament.” They thought all political power was to be transferred to that parliament. They would maintain a monarchy of some sort, but in a very weakened form. I never had any real reason to believe that these Shia clerics would end up pushing the envelope much too far so that Bahrain might become the type of Islamic republic that they simply didn't want.

Nevertheless, they had community roots, community ties, community institutions, a place to go, a network for communication, established meetings and such, and they were able to turn out the whole island in a way that nobody had ever seen before.

There had been trade union agitation in the past during the Arab nationalist period and some of that got to be pretty violent at times in Bahrain. But it was never anything like what happened in Bahrain during the mid-1990's. The whole younger generation was involved. One of the things that was striking was that the older generation, men over the age of 40, had grown up in this period when oil wealth was incalculable. Bahraini income was being spent at a staggering rate, through a major building programhouses, offices, roads and hospitals, health clinics, etc. All Bahraini got jobs and services; it was a good time and the population wasn't going to object. That mid-age group, by and large, did not take part in the rebellion of 1994 and 1997. It was the younger generation, the under-27 group, which in fact now was 67% of the population - and all educated, that took the leadership role There is 83% percent literacy rate in Bahrain, high by anybody's standards and off the charts by Arab standards. Not only did they not have jobs like their fathers did, but they didn't even have any prospect for such jobs. They had no desire to take the type of menial jobs their fathers had taken when they first came out of the rural communities and were ready to work at very simple tasks. So, the majority of the younger generation was educated and unemployable.

Q: Oil wealth had...

RANSOM: Oil production in Bahrain is down to under 40,000 barrels a day. It's a pittance. The Bahrainis share the production of an oil field which is in the waters between themselves and Saudi Arabia. One of the things I did early on in establishing myself in Bahrain was to help them get not only their half of the production of that field, but the Saudi half as well. I did that by working through our ambassador in Saudi Arabia, a wonderful man named Ray Mabus, who took on the job himself by working with Fahd, Sultan, Myeemi, Abdullah, and other Saudi officials. He proceeded without instructions

from the Department. We couldn't have gotten instructions from the Department, so we just didn't bother to ask for them. He did it and produced a very impressive change. It meant a lot more money for the Bahrainis at a time when they desperately were being pressed by daily widespread disturbances on the island— every night, every day. Gas cylinders were exploding with a big roar. Fires being set in the street. Cars were being stoned. It's a wonder that in this entire period no American was hurt. I lived with security concerns. That was the one thing that kept me awake at night in Bahrain simply because I was worried that something might happen to an American citizen. I was in the difficult position because I had to fight people in Washington— in Consular Affairs in particular — but also in intelligence community and in NEA who were predicting the end of the world and talking about withdrawing dependants and closing down and on and on and on. They were covering their back sides in Washington and that didn't make my job easier. Every week, I had to come in with predictions of what would happen the following week. I thank God that every single one of our predictions was right and every single one of the predictions from Washington were wrong.

Q: Was Washington seeing the heavy hand of Iran there?

RANSOM: No. They didn't see the heavy hand of Iran. They just thought there were local disturbances that did not require our involvement— we should just get out of the way. It's the old business of travel advisories. At the least possible disturbance, the Department issues a travel warning and a travel advisory and then a complete ban. For people sitting in Washington, there is nothing to be gained by a judicious decision to carry on as normal in the field.

Q: Because of lawyers in Congress, the Department had to be defensive.

RANSOM: And the press. We are very defensive. But I thought we had things to do in Bahrain—businesses to run, Navy activities to carry on, influence to wield with the government, etc. If we cut and ran, all of that would be negatively affected. We won the

evacuation battle, incidentally, but it was a battle that had to be fought every goddam week.

Q: How was the government in Bahrain responding to this? What was our role? Were we just staying out of the crossfire?

RANSOM: The government in Bahrain responded with relative restraint. Unlike Pakistan, Iraq, and Iran, they didn't fire into crowds and kill people wantonly. They tried to respond with arrests. They tried to set up informant networks. But the prime minister was intent on not negotiating with these people lest they assumed to be a separate political force. He said, “That would make us appear weak. We can't do that, David.” So our call for dialogue among responsible parties fell on deaf ears; there never was any dialogue. But we continued to maintain that view and continued to call for a dialogue.

I was very concerned to make sure that we supported the government of Bahrain. We had interests there. I thought they had a right to maintain law and order. When people wanted to go into the street and burn buildings and such, they had a right to arrest people. Every visitor who came to the island - and they tended to be all military people - was put on stage with a press conference at the airport when he left. I would set this up and I would hand each talking points that they would read into the record. In that way we maintained very clearly our support of the Bahraini government. That gave me some leverage in discussing a wide range of issues. By and large, the prime minister's view was that he simply had to stamp this uprising out. There were other voices in the government which eventually succeeded in securing the release of one of the Bahraini clerics who was the leader of the Shia — a man named Abdul Amir Al-Jamri. A deal was made. If he were released, he would not call for immediate election of a parliament. He didn't have to give that up as a goal, but he had to accept a process of small steps. He would have to denounce violence. He would be free to see people. He would have access to the government. The government for its part was going to release not only him but the other people they had taken into the custody.

The government lived up to its side of the bargain. This was forced down the throat of the prime minister, I think, by other members of his family. The government went about doing what it was supposed to do very scrupulously. Abdul Amir Al-Jamri did not. He began to what amounted a huge program of political mobilization that ended in a giant rally at his villa. There must have been 50,000 people present. It was a very Shia place, with young men dressed in black pumping their chest, calling for sacrifice and blood. I saw a videotape of it and it was, frankly, like downtown Tehran more than Bahrain. After that, there was a bomb set off at a major hotel in town. Then the government and the prime minister reversed itself. They rearrested the leaders of the demonstrations. They began arresting other people. They went to a policy of vigorous repression. I could not say they hadn't tried. They had. It was clear to me that the failure in this deal came from the Shia side. Bad leadership and bad judgment is what it came down to. Fanaticism drove that side in the end to go too far.

So, after that, it was a matter of just supporting the government. I didn't feel bad about this. I went on saying what I had to say and wanted to say. But they insisted that the only way out of the problem was to eliminate the opposition. They did that.

In my returns to the island since I have been retired, I have been reminded more than once by the minister of interior, for instance, that he thought his judgment was better than mine, i.e., he had a better comprehension of the opposition. I think he probably he is right to feel that way.

Q: I think there is a predilection on our part always to try to see if we can't get all the parties together to work problems out.

RANSOM: That's right.

Q: But when you're up against real fundamentalists, often it doesn't work that way.

RANSOM: I'm afraid that's true. When you're dealing with a religious movement led by religious men, you wonder if compromise isn't something of a sin in their eyes. I had no hopes of being in a place which would have “one man, one vote” eventually. But we had broader geo-political interests in the region with the Saudis and the Kuwaitis, (both Sunni regimes,) with our Navy base in Bahrain, and with a large American business community. We took a hard look at the situation and made up our mind as to where our interests lay and went on from there. We now have extraordinarily good relationships in Bahrain. That includes relationships with very large parts of the Shia community. Not with clerics. They remain a group with which there is very little communication and, frankly, we don't like. They are, for American diplomats, generally beyond reach. Wherever we are in the Middle East, it's hard to communicate with the clerics because they don't want to talk to us and because governments don't want us to talk to them. Furthermore, if you have come out of a liberal arts education in the United States and you sit down with a Muslim fundamentalist, it's very hard to make idle chatter. It's very hard to find much to talk about, much less agree on.

Q: You had been, obviously, in the Arab world for a long time. Did you feel a new spirit in the Gulf States after the Gulf War? Were they still concerned about being small, vulnerable states with Iran and Iraq glowering over them or was there a new sense of confidence? What was your impression?

RANSOM: The atmosphere changed completely. In the past when I had served in the Gulf, there was a strong ambivalence towards American military presence. Part of this was Arab nationalism, but part of it was the feeling on the part of our friends that if they depended too heavily on us, they would be disappointed — that when they needed us, we wouldn't come. So, we were a short term liability without being a long term asset. Therefore, they restricted what we could do. Bahrain was a good example of this. They allowed the Navy to function from its territory, but the admiral had to maintain his headquarters on ship-board. He could have an office on land, but he couldn't have families

there. The Navy was really just a support organization. We got a lot out political mileage out of it, but it was hardly a base or a headquarters.

When the war started, we had to overcome the attitude that we would prove unreliable, as we had been viewed as having been in Vietnam. There was concern by our local friends that we would leave them and the area worse off than it was before and that we wouldn't stand up to the Iraqis. When we did, it changed everything.

Now there is no credible criticism of American military presence in the area. We are able to conduct military operations in the Middle East against Iraq without a murmur of protest from any of the governments. On Bahrain, for instance, we not only have an onshore headquarters for the Navy, but we're putting $250 million into the new construction of additional facilities. Our presence, while it's not larger in terms of numbers of men, has a much higher profile and is clearly going to be there for a very long time. So, everything changed.

I think one of the nice symbols I got was a gift from the minister of defense which I still have on the shelves of my office here. I had paid an initial call on him. At the end of the meeting, he walked across the room and picked up a small Plexiglas display box. In it was a shard of twisted metal. He said, “This is from a scud missile that was downed by a Patriot missile. We picked it up on our soil and we'll never forget that you defended us.” That illustrated the change right there, that twisted piece of metal. I think it will go on for a very long time.

Q: What about the attitude towards Kuwait? Kuwait had not conducted itself in a very neighborly fashion prior to the Gulf War. At least, I had heard there was arrogance, a distancing, a” I'm better than you”, and all of that sort of stuff.

RANSOM: That's right. Arabs don't generally get along with each other very well. The Kuwaitis are very often at the bottom of everybody's list of esteemed friends. It's not that they harmed people so much as that they were just so self-righteous. It was entirely

unnatural and, in fact, hypocritical, for Kuwait to have been the most active state in espousing Palestinian and Arab nationalism when they were a traditional monarchy based on family dominance and profiting greatly from it. These inconsistencies were noticed. Before the war, the Kuwaitis made a mess of their relationships both with the Saudis and the Iraqis. They wouldn't listen to anybody. They certainly didn't deserve to be invaded. That was a piece of Iraqi folly and a brutality that will live in infamy.

But when they were invaded, there were a lot of people who certainly weren't sure what they should do about it. The instinct in the Gulf, where all states are small and weak, is to shy away from confrontation. It is for appeasement. They don't look at it the way we do. We're a big country. We can take a punch, get up, and fight back successfully. They can't. The whole initial thrust of statecraft in that part of the world is to avoid the first punch. That means appeasement and accommodation and that was how they thought about dealing with Iraq. They didn't want the Iraqis to go any farther. They hoped that maybe something could be worked out. Maybe Saddam would leave Kuwait. Maybe, maybe, maybe...

Then we showed up saying, “We're going to fight him, but we can only fight him if you're with us.” That posed a terrible dilemma. Ever since then, they have been in a state of confrontation with Iraq which is unnatural for that part of the world. While the situation has changed as I have described, the underlying tendencies are still there. The time will come, hopefully without Saddam, when they will once again want to repair their relationships with any regime that comes to power in Iraq. We will need to devise some ingenious diplomacy which will enable us to maintain a presence in the Gulf, while accommodating the fundamental tendencies of our friends.

Q: During the time you were in Bahrain, were the Bahrainis reaching an accommodation with Iran?

RANSOM: No. The Sunni government of Bahrain is deeply suspicious of Iran. At first, they believed that Iran was behind the local disturbances, but there was not a shred of

evidence of that. Eventually, some evidence was produced. They penetrated and arrested a gang of people who had been trained in the Bekaa Valley possibly by Iranians and who had some weapons. They clearly had Iranian backing. But they weren't doing anything. The irony is that they were inserted into Bahrain as “sleepers” and were inactive. They weren't doing anything to foment the disturbances, but they were in the country. It was credible intelligence. We were able to corroborate it.

The Bahrainis, with a rare display of courage, took the Iranians on frontally with this evidence. In the GCC, the Arab League, the UN, they secured condemnations and criticisms of the Iranians. They cut off ferry service, aircraft service and traffic to Iran. They ended issuing visas. They didn't close their embassy in Tehran, but they denounced the Iranians. One of the early and extraordinary results of this policy of confrontation was that the Iranians decided under pressure to end all criticism of Bahrain and its government on Iranian radio and television. That was done instantly. I went to the foreign minister and commended him for this policy of extraordinary courage and toughness. I said, “I just want you to know that one of the reasons you can do this and get away with it is that the U.S. Navy is sitting in the harbor and patrolling the Gulf. The Iranians have to take that into consideration. They cannot use their own muscle against you. So, your diplomacy can succeed.” He was perfectly aware of that. That is the way you build relationships. All of that was like duck soup to me. I loved doing it.

Q: You retired from Bahrain?

RANSOM: At the end of Bahrain, I had three more years in the Foreign Service that I could have spent before I reached time in class, but I decided I wanted to do something different, get out and try a different line of work.

I had been offered the job of deputy commandant in the National War College serving as ambassador-in- residence. That would have been exciting. I had attended the War College. But I just didn't want to do it. Enough was enough.

Q: So now you are running consultation services dealing with the Gulf.

RANSOM: Yes.

Q: Your wife has moved up in the higher reaches of both USIA and now State and is off to the Yemen as ambassador.

RANSOM: Marjorie is a career minister, a rank I never obtained. I was a minister counselor at the end. She has been named as ambassador to Yemen. The White House has now approved that, so we are looking forward to another move. In some way, I will be back in the diplomatic fray, something I never expected, even though I will be as a house-husband this time and a supporting actor on a stage where she will be front and center - and rightly so. I am very proud of her and very pleased for her.

Q: Great. I think we'll stop at this point then.

RANSOM: Thank you very much. These are magnificent opportunities to talk. You are terribly patient. I hope this somehow someday will put to good use.

End of interview